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To, Walter & Katie Sanders

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Xmas 1890

To Mum,
Happy Birthday 1993.
Love
Kim
xxx

[1880]

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A POEM

BY

WILLIAM MORRIS

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TO

MY WIFE

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK

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THE EARTHLY PARADISE.

OF Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing,
I cannot ease the burden of your fears,
Or make quick-coming death a little thing,
Or bring again the pleasure of past years,
Nor for my words shall ye forget your tears,
Or hope again for aught that I can say,
The idle singer of an empty day.

But rather, when aweary of your mirth,
From full hearts still unsatisfied ye sigh,
And, feeling kindly unto all the earth,
Grudge every minute as it passes by,
Made the more mindful that the sweet days die—
—Remember me a little then I pray,
The idle singer of an empty day.

The heavy trouble, the bewildering care
That weighs us down who live and earn our bread,
These idle verses have no power to bear;
So let me sing of names remembered,
Because they, living not, can ne'er be dead,
Or long time take their memory quite away
From us poor singers of an empty day.

Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme
Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,
Telling a tale not too importunate
To those who in the sleepy region stay,
Lulled by the singer of an empty day.

Folk say, a wizard to a northern king
At Christmas-tide such wondrous things did show,
That through one window men beheld the spring,
And through another saw the summer glow,
And through a third the fruited vines a-row,
While still, unheard, but in its wonted way,
Piped the drear wind of that December day.

So with this Earthly Paradise it is,
If ye will read aright, and pardon me,
Who strive to build a shadowy isle of bliss
Midmost the beating of the steely sea,
Where tossed about all hearts of men must be;
Whose ravening monsters mighty men shall slay,
Not the poor singer of an empty day.

PROLOGUE: THE WANDERERS.

ARGUMENT.

Certain gentlemen and mariners of Norway, having considered all that they had heard of the Earthly Paradise, set sail to find it, and after many troubles and the lapse of many years came old men to some Western land, of which they had never before heard: there they died, when they had dwelt there certain years, much honoured of the strange people.

FORGET six counties overhung with smoke,
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
Forget the spreading of the hideous town;
Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,
And dream of London, small, and white, and clean,
The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green;
Think, that below bridge the green lapping waves
Smite some few keels that bear Levantine staves,
Cut from the yew wood on the burnt-up hill,
And pointed jars that Greek hands toiled to fill,
And treasured scanty spice from some far sea,
Florence gold cloth, and Ypres napery,
And cloth of Bruges, and hogsheads of Guienne;
While nigh the thronged wharf Geoffrey Chaucer's pen
Moves over bills of lading—mid such times
Shall dwell the hollow puppets of my rhymes.

A nameless city in a distant sea,
White as the changing walls of faërie,
Thronged with much people clad in ancient guise
I now am fain to set before your eyes;
There, leave the clear green water and the quays,
And pass betwixt its marble palaces,
Until ye come unto the chiefest square;
A bubbling conduit is set midmost there,
And round about it now the maidens throng,
With jest and laughter, and sweet broken song,
Making but light of labour new begun
While in their vessels gleams the morning sun.
On one side of the square a temple stands,
Wherein the gods worshipped in ancient lands
Still have their altars; a great market-place
Upon two other sides fills all the space,
And thence the busy hum of men comes forth;
But on the cold side looking toward the north
A pillared council-house may you behold,
Within whose porch are images of gold,
Gods of the nations who dwelt anciently
About the borders of the Grecian sea.

Pass now between them, push the brazen door,
And standing on the polished marble floor
Leave all the noises of the square behind;
Most calm that reverent chamber shall ye find,
Silent at first, but for the noise you made
When on the brazen door your hand you laid
To shut it after you—but now behold
The city rulers on their thrones of gold,
Clad in most fair attire, and in their hands
Long carven silver-banded ebony wands;
Then from the daïs drop your eyes and see
Soldiers and peasants standing reverently
Before those elders, round a little band
Who bear such arms as guard the English land,
But battered, rent, and rusted sore, and they,
The men themselves, are shrivelled, bent, and grey;
And as they lean with pain upon their spears
Their brows seem furrowed deep with more than years;
For sorrow dulls their heavy sunken eyes;
Bent are they less with time than miseries.

Pondering on them the city grey-beards gaze
Through kindly eyes, midst thoughts of other days,
And pity for poor souls, and vague regret
For all the things that might have happened yet,
Until, their wonder gathering to a head,
The wisest man, who long that land has led,
Breaks the deep silence, unto whom again
A wanderer answers. Slowly as in pain,
And with a hollow voice as from a tomb
At first he tells the story of his doom,
But as it grows and once more hopes and fears,
Both measureless, are ringing round his ears,
His eyes grow bright, his seeming days decrease,
For grief once told brings somewhat back of peace.

THE ELDER OF THE CITY.

From what unheard-of world, in what strange keel,
Have ye come hither to our commonweal?
No barbarous folk, as these our peasants say,
But learned in memories of a long-past day,
Speaking, some few at least, the ancient tongue
That through the lapse of ages still has clung
To us, the seed of the Ionian race.
Speak out and fear not; if ye need a place
Wherein to pass the end of life away,
That shall ye gain from us from this same day,
Unless the enemies of God ye are;
We fear not you and yours to bear us war,
And scarce can think that ye will try again
Across the perils of the shifting plain
To seek your own land, whereso that may be:
For folk of ours bearing the memory
Of our old land, in days past oft have striven
To reach it, unto none of whom was given
To come again and tell us of the tale,
Therefore our ships are now content to sail,
About these happy islands that we know.

THE WANDERER.

Masters, I have to tell a tale of woe,
A tale of folly and of wasted life,
Hope against hope, the bitter dregs of strife,
Ending, where all things end, in death at last:
So if I tell the story of the past,
Let it be worth some little rest, I pray,
A little slumber ere the end of day.

No wonder if the Grecian tongue I know,
Since at Byzantium many a year ago
My father bore the twibil valiantly;
There did he marry, and get me, and die,
And I went back to Norway to my kin,
Long ere this beard ye see did first begin
To shade my mouth, but nathless not before
Among the Greeks I gathered some small lore,
And standing midst the Væring warriors heard
From this or that man many a wondrous word;
For ye shall know that though we worshipped God,
And heard mass duly, still of Swithiod
The Greater, Odin and his house of gold,
The noble stories ceased not to be told;
These moved me more than words of mine can say
E'en while at Micklegarth my folk did stay;
But when I reached one dying autumn-tide
My uncle's dwelling near the forest side,
And saw the land so scanty and so bare,
And all the hard things men contend with there,
A little and unworthy land it seemed,
And all the more of Asgard's days I dreamed,
And worthier seemed the ancient faith of praise.

But now, but now—when one of all those days
Like Lazarus' finger on my heart should be
Breaking the fiery fixed eternity,
But for one moment—could I see once more
The grey-roofed sea-port sloping towards the shore
Or note the brown boats standing in from sea,
Or the great dromond swinging from the quay,
Or in the beech-woods watch the screaming jay
Shoot up betwixt the tall trunks, smooth and grey.
Yea, could I see the days before distress
When very longing was but happiness!

Within our house there was a Breton squire
Well learned, who fail'd not to blow up the fire
That evermore unholpen burned in me
Strange lands and things beyond belief to see:
Much lore of many lands this Breton knew;
And for one tale I told, he told me two.
He, counting Asgard but a new-told thing,
Yet spoke of gardens ever blossoming
Across the western sea where none grew old,
E'en as the books at Micklegarth had told,
And said moreover that an English knight
Had had the Earthly Paradise in sight,
And heard the songs of those that dwelt therein,
But entered not, being hindered by his sin.
Shortly, so much of this and that he said
That in my heart the sharp barb entered,
And like real life would empty stories seem,
And life from day to day an empty dream.

Another man there was, a Swabian priest,
Who knew the maladies of man and beast,
And what things helped them; he the stone still sought
Whereby base metal into gold is brought,
And strove to gain the precious draught, whereby
Men live midst mortal men, yet never die;
Tales of the Kaiser Redbeard could he tell
Who neither went to Heaven nor yet to Hell,
When from that fight upon the Asian plain
He vanished, but still lives to come again
Men know not how or when; but I listening
Unto this tale thought it a certain thing
That in some hidden vale of Swithiod
Across the golden pavement still he trod.

But while our longing for such things so grew,
And ever more and more we deemed them true,
Upon the land a pestilence there fell
Unheard of yet in any chronicle,
And, as the people died full fast of it,
With these two men it chanced me once to sit,
This learned squire whose name was Nicholas,
And Swabian Laurence, as our manner was;
For, could we help it, scarcely did we part
From dawn to dusk: so heavy, sad at heart,

We from the castle-yard beheld the bay
Upon that ne'er-to-be-forgotten day,
Little we said amidst that dreary mood,
And certes nought that we could say was good.

It was a bright September afternoon,
The parched-up beech-trees would be yellowing soon;
The yellow flowers grown deeper with the sun
Were letting fall their petals one by one;
No wind there was, a haze was gathering o'er
The furthest bound of the faint yellow shore;
And in the oily waters of the bay
Scarce moving aught some fisher-cobbles lay,
And all seemed peace; and had been peace indeed
But that we young men of our life had need,
And to our listening ears a sound was borne
That made the sunlight wretched and forlorn—
—The heavy tolling of the minster bell—
And nigher yet a tinkling sound did tell
That through the streets they bore our Saviour Christ
By dying lips in anguish to be kissed.

At last spoke Nicholas, "How long shall we
Abide here, looking forth into the sea
Expecting when our turn shall come to die?
Fair fellows, will ye come with me and try
Now at our worst that long-desired quest,
Now—when our worst is death, and life our best."
"Nay, but thou know'st," I said, "that I but wait
The coming of some man, the turn of fate,
To make this voyage—but I die meanwhile,
For I am poor, though my blood be not vile,
Nor yet for all his lore doth Laurence hold
Within his crucibles aught like to gold;
And what hast thou, whose father driven forth
By Charles of Blois, found shelter in the North
But little riches as I needs must deem?"
"Well," said he, "things are better than they seem,
For 'neath my bed an iron chest I have
That holdeth things I have made shift to save
E'en for this end; moreover, hark to this,
In the next firth a fair long-ship there is
Well victualled, ready even now for sea,
And I may say it 'longeth unto me;
Since Marcus Erling, late its owner, lies
Dead at the end of many miseries,
And little Kirstin, as thou well mayst know,
Would be content throughout the world to go
If I but took her hand, and now still more
Hath heart to leave this poor death-stricken shore.
Therefore my gold shall buy us Bordeaux swords
And Bordeaux wine as we go oceanwards.
"What say ye, will ye go with me to-night,
Setting your faces to undreamed delight,
Turning your backs unto this troublous hell,
Or is the time too short to say farewell?"

"Not so," I said, "rather would I depart
Now while thou speakest; never has my heart
Been set on anything within this land."
Then said the Swabian, "Let us now take hand
And swear to follow evermore this quest
Till death or life have set our hearts at rest."
So with joined hands we swore, and Nicholas said,
"To-night, fair friends, be ye apparelléd
To leave this land, bring all the arms ye can
And such men as ye trust; my own good man
Guards the small postern looking towards St. Bride,
And good it were ye should not be espied,
Since mayhap freely ye should not go hence,
Thou Rolf in special; for this pestilence
Makes all men hard and cruel, nor are they
Willing that folk should 'scape if they must stay:
Be wise; I bid you for a while farewell,
Leave ye this stronghold when St. Peter's bell
Strikes midnight, all will surely then be still,
And I will bide you at King Tryggvi's hill
Outside the city gates."
Each went his way
Therewith, and I the remnant of that day
Gained for the quest three men that I deemed true,
And did such other things as I must do,
And still was ever listening for the chime,
Half maddened by the lazy lapse of time;
Yea, scarce I thought indeed that I should live
Till the great tower the joyful sound should give
That set us free. And so the hours went past,
Till startled by the echoing clang at last
That told of midnight, armed from head to heel
Down to the open postern did I steal,
Bearing small wealth—this sword that yet hangs here
Worn thin and narrow with so many a year,
My father's axe that from Byzantium,
With some few gems my pouch yet held, had come,
Nought else that shone with silver or with gold.
But by the postern gate could I behold
Laurence the priest all armed as if for war,
And my three men were standing not right far
From off the town-wall, having some small store
Of arms and furs and raiment: then once more
I turned, and saw the autumn moonlight fall
Upon the new-built bastions of the wall,
Strange with black shadow and grey flood of light,
And further off I saw the lead shine bright
On tower and turret-roof against the sky,
And looking down I saw the old town lie
Black in the shade of the o'er-hanging hill,

Stricken with death, and dreary, but all still
Until it reached the water of the bay,
That in the dead night smote against the quay
Not all unheard, though there was little wind.
But as I turned to leave the place behind,
The wind's light sound, the slowly falling swell,
Were hushed at once by that shrill-tinkling bell,
That in that stillness jarring on mine ears,
With sudden jangle checked the rising tears,
And now the freshness of the open sea
Seemed ease and joy and very life to me.
So greeting my new mates with little sound,
We made good haste to reach King Tryggvi's mound,
And there the Breton Nicholas beheld,
Who by the hand fair Kirstin Erling held,
And round about them twenty men there stood,
Of whom the more part on the holy rood
Were sworn till death to follow up the quest,
And Kirstin was the mistress of the rest.
Again betwixt us was there little speech,
But swiftly did we set on toward the beach,
And coming there our keel, the Fighting Man,
We boarded, and the long oars out we ran,
And swept from out the firth, and sped so well
That scarcely could we hear St. Peter's bell
Toll one, although the light wind blew from land;
Then hoisting sail southward we 'gan to stand,
And much I joyed beneath the moon to see
The lessening land that might have been to me
A kindly giver of wife, child, and friend,
And happy life, or at the worser end
A quiet grave till doomsday rend the earth.

Night passed, day dawned, and we grew full of mirth
As with the ever-rising morning wind
Still further lay our threatened death behind,
Or so we thought: some eighty men we were,
Of whom but fifty knew the shipman's gear,
The rest were uplanders; midst such of these
As knew not of our quest, with promises
Went Nicholas dealing florins round about,
With still a fresh tale for each new man's doubt,
Till all were fairly won or seemed to be
To that strange desperate voyage o'er the sea.

Now if ye ask me from what land I come
With all my folly,—Wick was once my home
Where Tryggvi Olaf's son and Olaf's sire
Lit to the ancient Gods the sacred fire,
Unto whose line am I myself akin,
Through him who Astrid in old time did win,
King Olaf's widow: let all that go by,
Since I was born at least to misery.

Now Nicholas came to Laurence and to me
To talk of what he deemed our course should be,
To whom agape I listened, since I knew
Nought but old tales, nor aught of false and true
Midst these, for all of one kind seemed to be
The Vineland voyage o'er the unknown sea
And Swegdir's search for Godhome, when he found
The entrance to a new world underground;
But Nicholas o'er many books had pored
And this and that thing in his mind had stored,
And idle tales from true report he knew.
—Would he were living now, to tell to you
This story that my feeble lips must tell!
Now he indeed of Vineland knew full well,
Both from my tales where truth perchance touched lies,
And from the ancient written histories;
But now he said, "The land was good enow
That Leif the son of Eric came unto,
But this was not our world, nay scarce could be
The door into a place so heavenly
As that we seek, therefore my rede is this,
That we to gain that sure abode of bliss
Risk dying in an unknown landless sea;
Although full certainly it seems to me
All that we long for there we needs must find.
"Therefore, O friends, if ye are of my mind,
When we are passed the French and English strait
Let us seek news of that desired gate
To immortality and blessed rest
Within the landless waters of the west,
But still a little to the southward steer.
Certes no Greenland winter waits us there,
No year-long night, but rather we shall find
Spice-trees set waving by the western wind,
And gentle folk who know no guile at least,
And many a bright-winged bird and soft-skinned beast,
For gently must the year upon them fall.
"Now since the Fighting Man is over small
To hold the mighty stores that we shall need,
To turn as now to Bremen is my rede,
And there to buy a new keel with my gold,
And fill her with such things as she may hold;
And thou henceforward, Rolf, her lord shalt be,
Since thou art not unskilled upon the sea."

But unto me most fair his saying seemed,
For of a land unknown to all I dreamed,
And certainly by some warm sea I thought
That we the soonest thereto should be brought.
Therefore with mirth enow passed every day
Till in the Weser stream at last we lay
Hearkening the bells of Bremen ring to mass,
For on a Sunday morn our coming was.
There in a while to chaffer did we fall,
And of the merchants bought a dromond tall
They called the Rose-Garland, and her we stored

With such-like victuals as we well might hoard,
And arms and raiment; also there we gained
Some few men more by stories true and feigned,
And by that time, now needing nought at all,
We weighed, well armed, with good hope not to fall
Into the hands of rovers of the sea,
Since at that time had we heard certainly
Edward of England drew all men to him,
And that his fleet held whatso keel could swim
From Jutland to Land's End; for all that, we
Thought it but wise to keep the open sea
And give to warring lands a full wide berth;
Since unto all of us our lives seemed worth
A better purchase than they erst had been.

So it befell that we no sail had seen
Till the sixth day at morn, when we drew near
The land at last and saw the French coast clear,—
The high land over Guines our pilot said.
There at the day-break, we, apparelléd
Like merchant ships in seeming, now perforce
Must meet a navy drawing thwart our course,
Whose sails and painted hulls not far away
Rolled slowly o'er the leaden sea and grey,
Beneath the night-clouds by no sun yet cleared;
But we with anxious hearts this navy neared,
For we sailed deep and heavy, and to fly
Would nought avail since we were drawn so nigh,
And fighting, must we meet but certain death.
Soon with amazement did I hold my breath
As from the wide bows of the Rose-Garland,
I saw the sun, new risen o'er the land,
Light up the shield-hung side of keel on keel,
Their sails like knights' coats, and the points of steel
Glittering from waist and castle and high top.
And well indeed awhile my heart might stop
As heading all the crowded van I saw,
Huge, swelling out without a crease or flaw,
A sail where, on the quartered blue and red,
In silk and gold right well apparelléd,
The lilies gleamed, the thin gaunt leopards glared
Out toward the land where even now there flared
The dying beacons. Ah, with such an one
Could I from town to town of France have run
To end my life upon some glorious day
Where stand the banners brighter than the May
Above the deeds of men, as certainly
This king himself has full oft wished to die.
And who knows now beneath what field he lies,
Amidst what mighty bones of enemies?
Ah, surely it had been a glorious thing
From such a field to lead forth such a king,
That he might live again with happy days,
And more than ever win the people's praise.
Nor had it been an evil lot to stand
On the worse side, with people of the land
'Gainst such a man, when even this might fall,
That it might be my luck some day to call
My battle-cry o'er his low-lying head,
And I be evermore rememberéd.
Well as we neared and neared, such thoughts I had
Whereby perchance I was the less a-drad
Of what might come, and at the worst we deemed
They would not scorn our swords; but as I dreamed
Of fair towns won and desperate feats of war,
And my old follies now were driven afar
By that most glorious sight, a loud halloo
Came down the wind, and one by me who knew
The English tongue cried that they bade us run
Close up and board, nor was there any one
Who durst say nay to that, so presently
Both keels were underneath the big ship's lee;
While Nicholas and I together passed
Betwixt the crowd of archers by the mast
Unto the poop, where, 'neath his canopy
The king sat, eyeing us as we drew nigh.

Broad-browed he was, hook-nosed, with wide grey eyes
No longer eager for the coming prize,
But keen and steadfast, many an ageing line,
Half hidden by his sweeping beard and fine,
Ploughed his thin cheeks, his hair was more than grey,
And like to one he seemed whose better day
Is over to himself, though foolish fame
Shouts louder year by year his empty name.
Unarmed he was, nor clad upon that morn
Much like a king, an ivory hunting-horn
Was slung about him, rich with gems and gold,
And a great white ger-falcon did he hold
Upon his fist; before his feet there sat
A scrivener making notes of this or that
As the king bade him, and behind his chair
His captains stood in armour rich and fair;
And by his side unhelmed, but armed, stood one
I deemed none other than the prince his son;
For in a coat of England was he clad,
And on his head a coronel he had.
Tall was he, slim, made apt for feats of war,
A splendid lord, yea, he seemed prouder far
Than was his sire, yet his eyes therewithal
With languid careless glance seemed wont to fall
On things about, as though he deemed that nought
Could fail unbidden to do all his thought.
But close by him stood a war-beaten knight,
Whose coat of war bore on a field of white
A sharp red pile, and he of all men there
Methought would be the one that I should fear
If I led men.

But midst my thoughts I heard
The king's voice as the high-seat now we neared,
And knew his speech, because in French it was,
That erewhile I had learnt of Nicholas.
"Fair sirs, what are ye? for on this one day,
I rule the narrow seas mine ancient way.
Me seemeth in the highest bark I know
The Flemish handiwork, but yet ye show
Unlike to merchants, though your ships are deep
And slowly through the water do ye creep;
And thou, fair sir, seem'st journeying from the north
With peltries Bordeaux-ward? Nay then go forth,
Thou wilt not harm us: yet if ye be men
Well-born and warlike, these are fair days, when
The good heart wins more than the merchant keeps,
And safest still in steel the young head sleeps;
And here are banners thou mayest stand beneath
And not be shamed either in life or death—
What, man, thou reddenest, wouldst thou say me no,
If underneath my banner thou shouldst go?
Nay, thou mayst speak, or let thy fellow say
What he is stuffed with, be it yea or nay."
For as he spoke my fellow gazed on me
With something like to fear, and hurriedly
As I bent forward, thrust me on one side,
And scarce the king's last word would he abide
But 'gan to say, "Sire, from the north we come,
Though as for me far nigher is my home.
Thy foes, my Lord, drove out my kin and me,
Ere yet thine armed hand was upon the sea;
Chandos shall surely know my father's name,
Loys of Dinan, which ill-luck, sword, and flame,
Lord Charles of Blois, the French king, and the pest
In this and that land now have laid to rest,
Except for me alone. And now, my Lord,
If I shall seem to speak an idle word
To such as thou art, pardon me therefore;
But we, part taught by ancient books and lore,
And part by what, nor yet so long ago,
This man's own countrymen have come to do,
Have gathered hope to find across the sea
A land where we shall gain felicity
Past tongue of man to tell of; and our life
Is not so sweet here, or so free from strife,
Or glorious deeds so common, that, if we
Should think a certain path at last to see
To such a place, men then could think us wise
To turn away therefrom, and shut our eyes,
Because at many a turning here and there
Swift death might lurk, or unaccustomed fear.
O King, I pray thee in this young man's face
Flash not thy banner, nor with thy frank grace
Tear him from life; but go thy way, let us
Find hidden death, or life more glorious
Than thou durst think of, knowing not the gate
Whereby to flee from that all-shadowing fate.
"O King, since I could walk a yard or twain,
Or utter anything but cries of pain,
Death was before me; yea, on the first morn
That I remember aught, among the corn
I wandered with my nurse, behind us lay
The walls of Vannes, white in the summer day,
The reapers whistled, the brown maidens sung,
As on the wain the topmost sheaf they hung,
The swallow wheeled above high up in air,
And midst the labour all was sweet and fair;
When on the winding road between the fields
I saw a glittering line of spears and shields,
And pleased therewith called out to some one by
E'en as I could; he scarce for fear could cry
'The French, the French!' and turned and ran his best
Toward the town gates, and we ran with the rest,
I wailing loud who knew not why at all;
But ere we reached the gates my nurse did fall,
I with her, and I wondered much that she
Just as she fell should still lie quietly;
Nor did the coloured feathers that I found
Stuck in her side, as frightened I crawled round,
Tell me the tale, though I was sore afeard
At all the cries and wailing that I heard.
"I say, my Lord, that arrow-flight now seems
The first thing rising clear from feeble dreams,
And that was death; and the next thing was death,
For through our house all spoke with bated breath
And wore black clothes; withal they came to me
A little child, and did off hastily
My shoon and hosen, and with that I heard
The sound of doleful singing, and afeard
Forbore to question, when I saw the feet
Of all were bare, like mine, as toward the street
We passed, and joined a crowd in such-like guise
Who through the town sang woeful litanies,
Pressing the stones with feet unused and soft,
And bearing images of saints aloft,
In hope 'gainst hope to save us from the rage
Of that fell pest, that as an unseen cage
Hemmed France about, and me and such as me
They made partakers of their misery.
"Lo death again, and if the time served now
Full many another picture could I show
Of death and death, and men who ever strive
Through every misery at least to live.
The priest within the minster preaches it,
And brooding o'er it doth the wise man sit
Letting life's joys go by. Well, blame me then,
If I who love this changing life of men,
And every minute of whose life were bliss
Too great to long for greater, but for this—
Mock me, who take this death-bound life in hand

And risk the rag to find a happy land,
Where at the worst death is so far away
No man need think of him from day to day—
Mock me, but let us go, for I am fain
Our restless road, the landless sea, to gain.'

His words nigh made me weep, but while he spoke
I noted how a mocking smile just broke
The thin line of the Prince's lips, and he
Who carried the afore-named armoury
Puffed out his wind-beat cheeks and whistled low:
But the king smiled, and said, "Can it be so?
I know not, and ye twain are such as find
The things whereto old kings must needs be blind.
For you the world is wide—but not for me,
Who once had dreams of one great victory
Wherein that world lay vanquished by my throne,
And now, the victor in so many an one,
Find that in Asia Alexander died
And will not live again; the world is wide
For you I say,—for me a narrow space
Betwixt the four walls of a fighting place.
"Poor man, why should I stay thee? live thy fill,
Of that fair life, wherein thou seest no ill
But fear of that fair rest I hope to win
One day, when I have purged me of my sin.
"Farewell, it yet may hap that I a king
Shall be remembered but by this one thing,
That on the morn before ye crossed the sea
Ye gave and took in common talk with me;
But with this ring keep memory of the morn,
O Breton, and thou Northman, by this horn
Remember me, who am of Odin's blood,
As heralds say: moreover it were good
Ye had some lines of writing 'neath my seal,
Or ye might find it somewhat hard to deal
With some of mine, who pass not for a word
Whate'er they deem may hold a hostile sword."

So as we kneeled this royal man to thank,
A clerk brought forth two passes sealed and blank,
And when we had them, with the horn and ring,
With few words did we leave the noble king,
And as adown the gangway steps we passed,
We saw the yards swing creaking round the mast,
And heard the shipman's ho, for one by one
The van outsailed before, by him had run
E'en as he stayed for us, and now indeed
Of his main battle must he take good heed:
But as from off the mighty side we pushed,
And in between us the green water rushed,
I heard his scalds strike up triumphantly
Some song that told not of the weary sea,
But rather of the mead and fair green-wood,
And as we leaned o'er to the wind, I stood
And saw the bright sails leave us, and soon lost
The pensive music by the strong wind tossed
From wave to wave; then turning I espied
Glittering and white upon the weather side
The land he came from, o'er the bright green sea,
Scarce duller than the land upon our lea;
For now the clouds had fled before the sun
And the bright autumn day was well begun.
Then I cried out for music too, and heard
The minstrels sing some well-remembered word,
And while they sung, before me still I gazed,
Silent with thought of many things, and mazed
With many longings; when I looked again
To see those lands, nought but the restless plain
With some far-off small fisher-boat was left.
A little hour for evermore had reft
The sight of Europe from my helpless eyes,
And crowned my store of hapless memories.

THE ELDER OF THE CITY.

Sit, friends, and tell your tale which seems to us
Shall be a strange tale and a piteous,
Nor shall it lack our pity for its woe,
Nor ye due thanks for all the things ye show
Of kingdoms nigh forgot that once were great,
And small lands come to glorious estate.
But, sirs, ye faint, behold these maidens stand
Bearing the blood of this our sunburnt land
In well-wrought cups,—drink now of this, that while
Ye poor folk wandered, hid from fortune's smile
Abode your coming, hidden none the less
Below the earth from summer's happiness.

THE WANDERERS.

Fair sirs, we thank you, hoping we have come
Through many wanderings to a quiet home
Befitting dying men—Good health and peace
To you and to this land, and fair increase
Of everything that ye can wish to have!

But to my tale: A fair south-east wind drave
Our ships for ten days more, and ever we
Sailed mile for mile together steadily,
But the tenth day I saw the Fighting Man
Brought up to wait me, and when nigh I ran
Her captain hailed me, saying that he thought
That we too far to northward had been brought,
And we must do our southing while we could,
So as his will to me was ever good
In such-like things, we changed our course straightway,
And as we might till the eleventh day
Stretched somewhat south; then baffling grew the wind,
But as we still were ignorant and blind
Nor knew our port, we sailed on helplessly
O'er a smooth sea, beneath a lovely sky,

And westward ever, but no signs of land
All through these days we saw on either hand,
Nor indeed hoped to see, because we knew
Some watery desert we must journey through,
That had been huge enough to keep all men
From gaining that we sought for until then.

Yet when I grew downcast, I did not fail
To call to mind, how from our land set sail
A certain man, and, after he had passed
Through many unknown seas, did reach at last
A rocky island's shore one foggy day,
And while a little off the land he lay
As in a dream he heard the folk call out
In his own tongue, but mazed and all in doubt
He turned therefrom, and afterwards in strife
With winds and waters, much of precious life
He wasted utterly, for when again
He reached his port after long months of pain,
Unto Biarmeland he chanced to go,
And there the isle he left so long ago
He knew at once, where many Northmen were.
And such a fate I could not choose but fear
For us sometimes; and sometimes when at night
Beneath the moon I watched the foam fly white
From off our bows, and thought how weak and small
Showed the Rose-Garland's mast that looked so tall
Beside the quays of Bremen; when I saw
With measured steps the watch on toward me draw,
And in the moon the helmsman's peering face,
And 'twixt the cordage strained across my place
Beheld the white sail of the Fighting Man
Lead down the pathway of the moonlight wan—
Then when the ocean seemed so measureless
The very sky itself might well be less,
When midst the changeless piping of the wind,
The intertwined slow waves pressed on behind
Rolled o'er our wake and made it nought again,
Then would it seem an ill thing and a vain
To leave the hopeful world that we had known,
When all was o'er, hopeless to die alone
Within this changeless world of waters grey.
But hope would come back to me with the day,
The talk of men, the viol's quivering strings,
Would bring my heart to think of better things.
Nor were our folk down-hearted through all this;
For partly with the hope of that vague bliss
Were they made happy, partly the soft air
And idle days wherethrough we then did fare
Were joy enow to rude sea-faring folk.

But this our ease at last a tempest broke
And we must scud before it helplessly,
Fearing each moment lest some climbing sea
Should topple o'er our poop and end us there,
Nathless we 'scaped, and still the wind blew fair
For what we deemed was our right course; but when
On the third eve, we, as delivered men,
Took breath because the gale was now blown out,
And from our rolling deck we looked about
Over the ridges of the dark grey seas,
And saw the sun, setting in golden ease,
Smile out at last from out the just-cleared sky
Over the ocean's weltering misery,
Still nothing of the Fighting Man we saw,
Which last was seen when the first gusty flaw
Smote them and us; but nothing would avail
To mend the thing, so onward did we sail,
But slowly, through the moonlit night and fair,
With all sails set that we could hoist in air,
And rolling heavily at first; for still
Each wave came on a glittering rippled hill,
And lifting us aloft, showed from its height
The waste of waves, and then to lightless night
Dropped us adown, and much ado had we
To ride unspilt the wallow of the sea.
But the sun rose up in a cloudless sky,
And from the east the wind blew cheerily,
And southwest still we steered; till on a day
As nigh the mast deep in dull thoughts I lay,
I heard a shout, and turning could I see
One of the shipmen hurrying fast to me
With something in his hand, who cast adown
Close to my hand a mass of sea-weed brown
Without more words, then knew I certainly
The wrack, that oft before I had seen lie
In sandy bights of Norway, and that eve
Just as the sun the ridgy sea would leave,
Shore birds we saw, that flew so nigh, we heard
Their hoarse loud voice that seemed a heavenly word.
Then all were glad, but I a fool and young
Slept not that night, but walked the deck and sung
Snatches of songs, and verily I think
I thought next morn of some fresh stream to drink.
What say I? next morn did I think to be
Set in my godless fair eternity.

Sirs, ye are old, and ye have seen perchance
Some little child for very gladness dance
Over a scarcely-noticed worthless thing,
Worth more to him than ransom of a king,
Did not a pang of more than pity take
Your heart thereat, not for the youngling's sake,
But for your own, for man that passes by,
So like to God, so like the beasts that die.—
Lo, sirs, my pity for myself is such,
When like an image that my hand can touch
My old self grows unto myself grown old.
—Sirs, I forget, my story is not told.

Next morn more wrack we saw, more birds, but still
No land as yet either for good or ill,

But with the light increased the favouring breeze,
And smoothly did we mount the ridgy seas.
Then as anigh the good ship's stern I stood
Gazing adown, a piece of rough-hewn wood
On a wave's crest I saw, and loud I cried,
"Drift-wood! drift-wood!" and one from by my side,
Maddened with joy, made for the shrouds, and clomb
Up to the top to look on his new home,
For sure he thought the green earth soon to see;
But gazing thence about him, presently
He shouted out, "A sail astern, a sail!"
Freshening the hope that now had 'gun to fail
Of seeing our fellows with the earth new found;
Wherefore we shortened sail, and sweeping round
The hazy edges of the sea and sky
Soon from the deck could see that sail draw nigh,
Half fearful lest she yet might chance to be
The floating house of some strange enemy,
Till on her sail we could at last behold
The ruddy lion with the axe of gold,
And Marcus Erling's sign set corner-wise,
The green, gold-fruited tree of Paradise.
—Ah, what a meeting as she drew anigh,
Greeted with ringing shouts and minstrelsy!
Alas, the joyful fever of that day,
When all we met still told of land that lay
Not far ahead! Yet at our joyous feast
A word of warning spoke the Swabian priest
To me and Nicholas, for, "O friends," he said,
"Right welcome is the land that lies ahead
To us who cannot turn, and in this air,
Washed by this sea, it cannot but be fair,
And good for us poor men I make no doubt;
Yet, fellows, must I warn you not to shout
Ere we have left the troublous wood behind
Wherein we wander desperate and blind:
Think what may dwell there! Call to mind the tale
We heard last winter o'er the yule-tide ale,
When that small, withered, black-eyed Genoese
Told of the island in the outer seas
He and his fellows reached upon a tide,
And how, as lying by a streamlet's side,
With ripe fruits ready unto every hand,
And lacking not for women of the land,
The devils came and slew them, all but him,
Who, how he scarce knew, made a shift to swim
Off to his ship: nor must ye, fellows, fear
Such things alone, for mayhap men dwell here
Who worship dreadful gods, and sacrifice
Poor travellers to them in such horrid wise
As I have heard of; or let this go by,
Yet we may chance to come to slavery,
Or all our strength and weapons be too poor
To conquer such beasts as the unknown shore
May breed; or set all these ill things aside,
It yet may be our lot to wander wide
Through many lands before at last we come
Unto the gates of our enduring home."

But what availed such warning unto us,
Who by this change made nigh delirious,
Spake wisdom outward from the teeth, but thought
That in a little hour we should be brought
Unto that bliss our hearts were set upon,
That more than very heaven we now had won.

Well, the next morn unto our land we came,
And even now my cheeks grow red with shame,
To think what words I said to Nicholas,
(Since on that night in the great ship I was,)
Asking him questions, as if he were God,
Or at the least in that fair land had trod,
And knew it well, and still he answered me
As some great doctor in theology
Might his poor scholar, asking him of heaven.
But unto me next morn the grace was given
To see land first, and when men certainly
That blessed sight of all sights could descry,
All hearts were melted, and with happy tears,
Born of the death of all our doubts and fears,
Yea, with loud weeping, each did each embrace
For joy that we had gained the glorious place.
Then must the minstrels sing, then must they play
Some joyous strain to welcome in the day,
But for hot tears could see nor bow nor string,
Nor for the rising sobs make shift to sing;
Yea, some of us in that first ecstasy
For joy of 'scaping death went near to die.
Then might be seen how hard is this world's lot
When such a marvel was our grief forgot,
And what a thing the world's joy is to bear,
When on our hearts the broken bonds of care
Had left such scars, no man of us could say
The burning words upon his lips that lay;
Since, trained to hide the depths of misery,
Amidst that joy no more our tongues were free.
Ah, then it was indeed when first I knew,
When all our wildest dreams seemed coming true,
And we had reached the gates of Paradise
And endless bliss, at what unmeasured price
Man sets his life, and drawing happy breath,
I shuddered at the once familiar death.
Alas, the happy day! the foolish day!
Alas, the sweet time, too soon passed away!

Well, in a while I gained the Rose-Garland,
And as toward shore we steadily did stand
With all sail set, the wind, which had been light,
Since the beginning of the just past night,
Failed utterly, and the sharp ripple slept,
Then toiling hard forward our keels we swept,

Making small way, until night fell again,
And then, although of landing we were fain,
Needs must we wait; but when the sun was set
Then the cool night a light air did beget,
And 'neath the stars slowly we moved along,
And found ourselves within a current strong
At daybreak, and the land beneath our lee.
There a long line of breakers could we see,
That on a yellow sandy beach did fall,
And then a belt of grass, and then a wall
Of green trees, rising dark against the sky.
Not long we looked, but anchored presently
A furlong from the shore, and then, all armed,
Into the boats the most part of us swarmed,
And pulled with eager hands unto the beach,
But when the seething surf our prow did reach
From off the bows I leapt into the sea
Waist deep, and, wading, was the first to be
Upon that land; then to the flowers I ran,
And cried aloud like to a drunken man
Words without meaning, whereof none took heed,
For all across the yellow beach made speed
To roll among the fair flowers and the grass.
But when our folly somewhat tempered was,
And we could talk like men, we thought it good
To try if we could pierce the thick black wood,
And see what men might dwell in that new land;
But when we entered it, on either hand
Uprose the trunks, with underwood entwined
Making one thicket, thorny, dense, and blind;
Where with our axes, labouring half the day,
We scarcely made some half a rod of way;
Therefore, we left that place and tried again,
Yea, many times, but yet was all in vain;
So to the ships we went, when we had been
A long way in our arms, nor yet had seen
A sign of man, but as for living things,
Gay birds with many-coloured crests and wings,
Conies anigh the beach, and while we hacked
Within the wood, grey serpents, yellow-backed,
And monstrous lizards; yea, and one man said
That 'midst the thorns he saw a dragon's head;
And keeping still his eyes on it he felt
For a stout shaft he had within his belt;
But just as he had got it to the string
And drawn his hand aback, the loathly thing
Vanished away, and how he could not tell.

Now spite of all, little our courage fell,
For this day's work, nay rather, all things seemed
To show that we no foolish dream had dreamed—
The pathless, fearful sea, the land that lay
So strange, so hard to find, so far away,
The lovely summer air, the while we knew
That unto winter now at home it grew,
The flowery shore, the dragon-guarded wood,
So hard to pierce—each one of these made good
The foolish hope that led us from our home,
That we to utter misery might come.

Now next morn when the tide began to flow
We weighed, and somewhat northward did we go
Coasting that land, and every now and then
We went ashore to try the woods again,
But little change we found in them, until
Inland we saw a bare and scarped white hill
Rise o'er their tops, and going further on
Unto a broad green river's mouth we won,
And entering there, ran up it with the flood,
For it was deep, although 'twixt walls of wood
Darkly enough its shaded stream did flow,
And high trees hid the hill we saw just now.
So as we peered about from side to side
A path upon the right bank we espied
Through the thick wood, and mooring hastily
Our ships unto the trunks of trees thereby,
Laurence and I with sixty men took land
With bow or cutting sword or bill in hand,
And bearing food to last till the third day;
But with the others there did Nicholas stay
To guard the ships, with whom was Kirstin still,
Who now seemed pining for old things, and ill,
Spite of the sea-breeze and the lovely air.
But as for us, we followed up with care
A winding path, looking from left to right
Lest any deadly thing should come in sight;
And certainly our path a dragon crossed
That in the thicket presently we lost;
And some men said a leopard they espied,
And further on we heard a beast that cried;
Serpents we saw, like those we erst had seen,
And many-coloured birds, and lizards green,
And apes that chattered from amidst the trees.
So on we went until a dying breeze
We felt upon our faces, and soon grew
The forest thinner, till at last we knew
The great scarped hill, which if we now could scale
For sight of much far country would avail;
But coming there we climbed it easily,
For though escarped and rough toward the sea,
The beaten path we followed led us round
To where a soft and grassy slope we found,
And there it forked; one arm led up the hill,
Another through the forest wound on still;
Which last we left, in good hope soon to see
Some signs of man, which happened presently;
For two-thirds up the hill we reached a space
Levelled by man's hand in the mountain's face,
And there a rude shrine stood, of unhewn stones
Both walls and roof, with a great heap of bones
Piled up outside it: there awhile we stood
In doubt, for something there made cold our blood,
Till brother Laurence, with a whispered word,
Crossed himself thrice, and drawing forth his sword

Entered alone, but therewith presently
From the inside called out aloud to me
To follow, so I trembling, yet went in
To that abode of unknown monstrous sin,
And others followed: therein could we see,
Amidst the gloom by peering steadily,
An altar of rough stones, and over it
We saw a god of yellow metal sit,
A cubit long, which Laurence with his tongue
Had touched and found pure gold; withal there hung
Against the wall men's bodies brown and dry,
Which gaudy rags of raiment wretchedly
Did wrap about, and all their heads were wreathed
With golden chaplets; and meanwhile we breathed
A heavy, faint, and sweet spice-laden air,
As though that incense late were scattered there.
But from that house of devils soon we passed
Trembling and pale, Laurence the priest, the last,
And got away in haste, nor durst we take
Those golden chaplets for their wearers' sake,
Or that grim golden devil whose they were;
Yet for the rest, although they brought us fear
They did but seem to show our heaven anigh
Because we deemed these might have come to die
In seeking it, being slain for fatal sin.
And now we set ourselves in haste to win
Up to that mountain's top, and on the way
Looked backward oft upon the land that lay
Beneath the hill, and still on every hand
The forest seemed to cover all the land,
But that some four leagues off we saw a space
Cleared of the trees, and in that open place
Houses we seemed to see, and rising smoke
That told where dwelt the unknown, unseen folk.
But when at last the utmost top we won
A dismal sight our eyes must look upon;
The mountain's summit, levelled by man's art,
Was hedged by high stones set some yard apart
All round a smooth paved space, and midst of these
We saw a group of well-wrought images,
Or so they seemed at first, who stood around
An old hoar man laid on the rocky ground
Who seemed to live as yet; now drawing near
We saw indeed what things these figures were;
Dead corpses, by some deft embalmer dried,
And on this mountain after they had died
Set up like players at a yule-tide feast;
Here stood a hunter, with a spotted beast
Most like a leopard, writhing up his spear;
Nigh the old man stood one as if drawn near
To give him drink, and on each side his head
Two damsels daintily apparelled;
And then again, nigh him who bore the cup,
Were two who 'twixt them bore a litter up
As though upon a journey he should go,
And round about stood men with spear and bow,
And painted targets as the guard to all,
Headed by one beyond man's stature tall,
Who, half turned round, as though he gave the word,
Seemed as he once had been a mighty lord.
But the live man amid the corpses laid,
Turning from side to side, some faint word said
Now and again, but kept his eyes shut fast,
And we when from the green slope we had passed
On to this dreadful stage, awe-struck and scared,
Awhile upon the ghastly puppets stared,
Then trembling, with drawn swords, came close anigh
To where the hapless ancient man did lie,
Who at the noise we made now oped his eyes
And fixing them upon us did uprise,
And with a fearful scream stretched out his hand,
While upright on his head his hair did stand
For very terror, while we none the less
Were rooted to the ground for fearfulness,
And scarce our weapons could make shift to hold.
But as we stood and gazed, over he rolled
Like a death-stricken bull, and there he lay,
With his long-hoarded life quite past away.
Then in our hearts did wonder conquer fear,
And to the dead men did we draw anear
And found them such-like things as I have said,
But he, their master, was apparelled
Like to those others that we saw e'en now
Hung up within the dreary house below.

Right little courage had we there to stay,
So down the hill again we took our way,
When looking landward thence we had but seen,
All round about, the forest dull and green,
Pierced by the river where our ships we left,
And bounded by far-off blue mountains, cleft
By passes here and there; but we went by
The chapel of the gold god silently,
For doubts had risen in our hearts at last
If yet the bitterness of death were past.
But having come again into the wood,
We there took counsel whether it were good
To turn back to the ships, or push on still
Till we had reached the place that from the hill
We had beheld, and since the last seemed best
Onward we marched, scarce staying to take rest
And eat some food, for feverish did we grow
For haste the best or worst of all to know.
Along the path that, as I said before,
Led from the hill, we went, and laboured sore
To gain the open ere the night should fall,
But yet in vain, for like a dreary pall
Cast o'er the world, the darkness hemmed us in
And though we struggled desperately to win

From out the forest through the very night,
Yet did that labour so abate our might,
We thought it good to rest among the trees,
Nor come on those who might be enemies
In the thick darkness, neither did we dare
To light a fire lest folk should slay us there
Mazed and defenceless; so the one half slept
As they might do, the while the others kept
Good guard in turn; and as we watched we heard
Sounds that might well have made bold men afeard,
And cowards die of fear, but we, alone,
Apart from all, such desperate men were grown,
If we should fail to win our Paradise,
That common life we now might well despise.

So by the day-break on our way we were
When we had seen to all our fighting gear;
And soon we came unto that open space,
And here and there about a grassy place
Saw houses scattered, neither great nor fair,
For they were framed of trees as they grew there,
And walled with wattle-work from tree to tree;
And thereabout beasts unknown did we see,
Four-footed, tame; and soon a man came out
From the first house, and with a startled shout
Took to his heels, and soon from far and near,
The folk swarmed out, and still as in great fear
Gave us no second look, but ran their best,
And they being clad but lightly for the rest,
To follow them seemed little mastery.
So to their houses gat we speedily
To see if we might take some loiterer;
And some few feeble folk we did find there,
Though most had fled, and unto these with pain
We made some little of our meaning plain,
And sent an old man forth into the wood
To show his fellows that our will was good.
Who going from us came back presently
His message done, and with him two or three
The boldest of his folk, and they in turn
A little of us by our signs did learn,
Then went their way: and so at last all fear
Was laid aside, and thronging they drew near
To look upon us; and at last came one
Who had upon his breast a golden sun,
And in strange glittering gay attire was clad;
He let us know our coming made him glad,
And bade us come with him; so thereon we,
Thinking him some one in authority,
Rose up and followed him, who with glad face
Led us through closer streets of that strange place,
And brought us lastly to a shapely hall
Round and high-roofed, held up with tree-trunks tall,
And midst his lords the barbarous king sat there,
Gold-crowned, in strange apparel rich and fair,
Whereat we shuddered, for we saw that he
Was clad like him that erewhile we did see
Upon the hill, and like those other ones
Hung in the dismal shrine of unhewn stones.

Yet nought of evil did he seem to think,
But bade us sit by him and eat and drink,
So eating did we speak by signs meanwhile
Each unto each, and they would laugh and smile
As folk well pleased; and with them all that day
Well feasted, learning some things did we stay.
And sure of all the folk I ever saw
These were the gentlest: if they had a law
We knew not then, but still they seemed to be
Like the gold people of antiquity.

Now when we tried to ask for that good land,
Eastward and seaward did they point the hand;
Yet if they knew what thing we meant thereby
We knew not; but when we for our reply
Said that we came thence, they made signs to say
They knew it well, and kneeling down they lay
Before our feet, as people worshipping.

But we, though somewhat troubled at this thing,
Failed not to hope, because it seemed to us
That this so simple folk and virtuous,
So happy midst their dreary forest bowers,
Showed at the least a better land than ours,
And some yet better thing far onward lay.

Amidst all this we made a shift to pray
That some of them would go with us, to be
Our fellows on the perilous green sea,
And much did they rejoice when this they knew,
And straightway midst their young men lots they drew,
And the next morn of these they gave us ten,
And wept at our departing.

Now these men,
Though brown indeed through dint of that hot sun,
Were comely and well knit, as any one
I saw in Greece, and fit for deeds of war,
Though as I said of all men gentlest far;
Their arms were axe and spear, and shield and bow,
But nought of iron did they seem to know,
For all their cutting tools were edged with flint,
Or with soft copper, that soon turned and bent;
With cloths of cotton were their bodies clad,
But other raiment for delight they had
Most fairly woven of some unknown thing;
And all of them from little child to king
Had many ornaments of beaten gold:
Certes, we might have gathered wealth untold
Amongst them, if thereto had turned our thought,
But none the glittering evil valued aught.

Now of these foresters, we learned, that they,
Hemmed by the woods, went seldom a long way
From where we saw them, and no boat they had,
Nor much of other people good or bad
They knew, and ever had they little war:
But now and then a folk would come from far
In ships unlike to ours, and for their gold

Would give them goods; and some men over bold
Who dwelt beyond the great hill we had seen,
Had waged them war, but these all slain had been
Among the tangled woods by men who knew
What tracks of beasts the thicket might pierce through.
Such things they told us whom we brought away,
But after this; for certes on that day
Not much we gathered of their way of life.
So to the ships we came at last, and rife
With many things new learned, we told them all,
And though our courage might begin to fall
A little now, yet each to other we
Made countenance of great felicity,
And spoke as if the prize were well-nigh won.

Behold then, sirs, how fortune led us on,
Little by little till we reached the worst,
And still our lives grew more and more accurst.

THE ELDER OF THE CITY.

Nay, friends, believe your worser life now past
And that a little bliss is reached at last;
Take heart, therefore, for like a tale so told
Is each man's life: and ye, who have been bold
To see and suffer such unheard-of things,
Henceforth shall be more worshipped than the kings
We hear you name; since then ye reach this day,
How are ye worse for what has passed away?

THE WANDERER.

Kind folk, what words of ours can give you praise
That fits your kindness; yet for those past days,
If we bemoan our lot, think this at least:
We are as men, who cast aside a feast
Amidst their lowly fellows, that they may
Eat with the king, and who at end of day,
Bearing sore stripes, with great humility
Must pray the bedesmen of those men to be.
They scorned that day while yet the sun was high.

Not long within the river did we lie,
But put to sea intending as before
To coast with watchful eyes the unknown shore,
And strive to pierce the woods: three days we sailed,
And little all our watchfulness availed,
Though all that time the wind was fair enow;
But on the fourth day it began to blow
From off the land, and still increased on us
Until the storm grown wild and furious,
Although at anchor still we strove to ride,
Had blown us out into the ocean wide,
Far out of sight of land; and when at last,
After three days, its fury was o'erpast,
Of all our counsels this one was the best
To beat back blindly to the longed-for west.
Baffling the wind was, toilsome was the way,
Nor did we make land till the thirtieth day,
When both flesh-meat and water were nigh spent,
But anchoring at last, ashore we went,
And found the land far better than the first,
For this with no thick forest was accurst,
Though here and there were scattered clumps of wood.
The air was cooler, too, but soft and good,
Fair streams we saw, and herds of goats and deer,
But nothing noisome for a man to fear.
So since at anchor safe our good ships lay
Within the long horns of a sandy bay,
We thought it good ashore to take our ease,
And pitched our tents anigh some maple-trees
Not far from shore, and there with little pain
Enough of venison quickly did we gain
To feast us all, and high feast did we hold,
Lighting great fires, for now the nights were cold,
And we were fain a noble roast to eat;
Nor did we lack for drink to better meat,
For from the dark hold of the Rose-Garland
A well-hooped cask our shipmen brought a-land,
That knew some white-walled city of the Rhine.
There crowned with flowers, and flushed with noble wine,
Hearkening the distant murmur of the main,
And safe upon our promised land again,
What wonder if our vain hopes rose once more
And Heaven seemed dull beside that twice-won shore.
By midnight in our tents were we asleep,
And little watch that night did any keep,
For as our garden that fair land we deemed
But in my sleep of lovely things I dreamed
For I was back at Micklegarth once more,
But not a court-man's son there as of yore,
But the Greek king, or so I seemed to be,
Set on the throne whose awe and majesty
Gold lions guard; before whose moveless feet
A damsel knelt, praying in words so sweet
For what I know not now, that both mine eyes
Grew full of tears, and I must bid her rise
And sit beside me; step by step she came
Up the gold stair, setting my heart a-flame
With all her beauty, till she reached the throne
And there sat down, but as with her alone
In that vast hall, my hand her hand did seek,
And on my face I felt her balmy cheek,
Throughout my heart there shot a dreadful pang,
And down below us, with a sudden clang
The golden lions rose, and roared aloud,
And in at every door did armed men crowd,
Shouting out death and curses, and I fell
Dreaming indeed that this at last was hell.

But therewithall I woke, and through the night
Heard shrieks and shouts of clamour of the fight,
And snatching up my axe, unarmed beside
Nor scarce awaked, my rallying cry I cried,
And with good haste unto the hubbub went;
But even in the entry of the tent
Some dark mass hid the star-besprinkled sky,
And whistling past my head a spear did fly,
And striking out I saw a naked man
Fall 'neath my blow, nor heeded him, but ran
Unto the captain's tent, for there indeed
I saw my fellows stand at desperate need,
Beset with foes, nor yet armed more than I,
Though on the way I rallied hastily
Some better armed, with whom I straightway fell
Upon the foe, who with a hideous yell
Turned round upon us; but we desperate
And fresh, and dangerous for our axes' weight,
Fought so that they must needs give back a pace
And yield our fellows some small breathing space;
Then gathering all together, side by side
We laid our weapons, and our cries we cried
And rushed upon them, who abode no more
Our levelled points, but scattering from the shore
Ran here and there; but when some two or three
We in the chase had slain right easily,
We held our hands, nor followed more their flight,
Fearing the many chances of the night.

Then did we light our watch-fires up again
And armed us all, and found three good men slain;
Ten wounded, among whom was Nicholas,
Though little heedful of these things he was,
For in his tent he sat upon the ground,
Holding fair Kirstin's hand, whom he had found
Dead, with a feathered javelin in her breast.

But taking counsel now, we thought it best
To gather up our goods and get away
Unto the ships, and there to wait the day;
Nor did we loiter, fearful lest the foe,
Who somewhat now our feebleness must know,
Should come on us with force made manifold,
And all our story quickly should be told.
So to our boats in haste the others gat,
But in his tent, not speaking, Nicholas sat,
Nor moved when o'er his head we struck the tent.
But when all things were ready, then I went
And raised the body up, and silently
Bore it adown the beach unto the sea;
Then he arose and followed me, and when
He reached at last the now embarking men,
And in a boat my burden I had laid,
He sat beside; but no word had he said
Since first he knew her slain. Such ending had
The night at whose beginning all were glad.

One wounded man of theirs we brought with us,
Hoping for news, but he grew furious
When he awoke aboard from out his swoon,
And tore his wounds, and smote himself, and soon
Died outright, though his hurts were slight enow,
So nought from him of that land could we know.
But now as we that luckless country scanned,
Just at the daybreak did we see a band
Of these barbarians come with shout and yell
Across the place where all these things befell,
Down to the very edges of the sea;
But though armed now, by day, we easily
Had made a shift no few of them to slay,
It seemed to us the better course to weigh
And try another entry to that land;
So southward with a light wind did we stand,
Not losing sight of shore, and now and then
I led ashore the more part of our men
Well armed, by daylight, and the barbarous folk
Once and again from bushments on us broke,
Whom without loss of men we brushed away.
But in our turn it happed to us one day
Upon a knot of them unwares to come,
These we bore back with us, the most of whom
Would neither eat nor drink, but sullenly
Sat in a corner of the ship to die;
But 'mongst them was a woman, who at last,
Won by the glitter of some toy we cast
About her neck, by soft words and by wine,
Began to answer us by sign to sign;
Of whom we learned not much indeed, but when
We set on shore those tameless savage men,
And would have left her too, she seemed to pray,
For terror of her folk, with us to stay:
Therefore we took her back with us, and she,
Though learning not our tongue too easily,
Unto the forest-folk began to speak.

Now midst all this passed many a weary week,
And we no nigher all the time had come
Unto the portal of our blissful home,
And needs our bright hope somewhat must decay
Yet none the less as dull day passed by day,
Still onward by our folly were we led,
And still with lies our wavering hearts we fed.

Happy we were in this, that still the wind
Blew as we wished, and still the air was kind;
Nor failed we of fresh water as we went
Along the coast, and oft our bows we bent
On beast and fowl, and had no lack of food.

Upon a day it chanced, that as we stood
Somewhat off shore to fetch about a ness,
Although the wind was blowing less and less,
We were entrapped into a fearful sea,
And carried by a current furiously
Away from shore, and there were we so tost
That for awhile we deemed ourselves but lost
Amid those tumbling waves; but now at last,
When out of sight of land we long had passed,

The sea fell, and again toward land we stood,
Which, reached upon the tenth day, seemed right good
But yet untilled, and mountains rose up high
Far inland, mingling with the cloudy sky.
Once more we took the land, and since we found
That, more than ever, beasts did there abound,
We pitched our camp beside a little stream;
But scarcely there of Paradise did dream
As heretofore. Our camp we fortified
With wall and dyke, and then the land we tried,
And found the people most untaught and wild,
Nigh void of arts, but harmless, good, and mild,
Nor fearing us: with some of these we went
Back to our camp and people, with intent
To question them by her we last had got.
But when she heard their tongue she knew it not,
Nor they her tongue: howbeit they seemed to say,
That o'er the mountains other lands there lay
Where folk dwelt, clothed and armed like unto us,
But made withal as they were timorous
And feared them much. Then we made signs that we,
So little feared by all that tumbling sea,
Would go to seek them; but they still would stay
Our journey; nathless what they meant to say
We scarce knew yet: howbeit, since these men
Were friendly, and the weather, which till then
Had been most fair, now grew to storm and rain
And the wind blew on land, and not in vain
To us poor fools, that tale, half understood
Those folk had told: midst all, we thought it good
To haul our ships ashore, and build us there
A place where we might dwell, till we could fare
Along the coast, or inland it might be,
That fertile realm, those goodly men to see.
Right foul the weather was a dreary space
While we abode with people of that place,
And built them huts, as well we could, for we
Who dwell in Norway have great mastery
In woodwright's craft; but they in turn would bring
Wild fruits to us, and many a woodland thing,
And catch us fish, and show us how to take
The smaller beasts, and meanwhile for our sake
They learned our tongue, and we too somewhat learned
Of words of theirs; but day by day we yearned
To cross those mountains, and I woke no morn,
To find myself lost, wretched, and forlorn,
But those far-off white summits gave me heart;
Now too those folk their story could impart
Concerning them, and that in short was this—
—Beyond them lay a fair abode of bliss
Where dwelt men like the Gods, and clad as we,
Who doubtless lived on through eternity
Unless the very world should come to nought;
But never had they had the impious thought
To scale those mountains; since most surely, none
Of men they knew could follow up the sun,
The fearful sun, and live; but as for us
They said, who were so wise and glorious
It might not be so.

Thus they spoke one eve
When the black rain-clouds for a while did leave
Upon the fresh and teeming earth to frown,
And we they spoke to had just set us down
Midmost their village: from the resting earth
Sweet odours rose, and in their noisy mirth
The women played, as rising from the brook
Off their long locks the glittering drops they shook;
Betwixt the huts the children raced along;
Some man was singing a wild barbarous song
Anigh us, and these folk possessing nought,
And lacking nought, lived happy, free from thought,
Or so it seemed—but we, what thing could pay
For all that we had left so far away?
Such thoughts as these I uttered murmuringly,
But lifting up mine eyes, against the sky
Beheld the snowy peaks brought near to us
By a strange sunset, red and glorious,
That seemed as though the much-praised land it lit,
And would do, long hours after we must sit
Beneath the twinkling stars with none to heed:
And though I knew it was not so indeed,
Yet did it seem to answer me, as though
It called us once more on our quest to go.
Then springing up I raised my voice and said,—
"What is it, fellows, fear ye to be dead
Upon those peaks, when, if ye loiter here
Half dead, with very death still drawing near,
Your lives are wasted all the more for this,
That ye in this world thought to garner bliss;
Unless indeed ye chance to think it well
With this unclad and barbarous folk to dwell,
Deedless and hopeless; ye, to whom the land,
That o'er the world has sent so many a band
Of conquering men, was yet not good enough.
"Did ye then deem the way would not be rough
Unto the lovely land ye so desire?
Did ye not rather swear through blood and fire,
And all ill things to follow up this quest
Till life or death your longing laid to rest?
"Let us not linger here then, until fate
Make longing unavailing, hope too late,
And turn to lamentations all our prayers!
But with to-morrow cast aside your cares,
And stout of heart make ready for the strife
'Twixt this short time of dreaming and real life.
"Lo now, if but the half will come with me,
The summit of those mountains will I see,
Or, else die first; yea, if but twenty men
Will follow me; nor will I stay if ten

Will share my trouble or felicity—
What do I say? alone, O friends, will I
Seek for my life, for no man can die twice,
And death or life may give me Paradise!"

Then Nicholas said, "Rolf, I will go with thee,
For desperate do I think the quest to be,
And I shall die, and that to me is well,
Or else I may forget, I cannot tell—
Still I will go."
Then Laurence said, "I too
Will go, remembering what I said to you,
When any land, the first to which we came
Seemed that we sought, and set your hearts aflame,
And all seemed won to you: but still I think,
Perchance years hence, the fount of life to drink,
Unless by some ill chance I first am slain.
But boundless risk must pay for boundless gain.'
So most men said, but yet a few there were
Who said, "Nay, soothly let us live on here,
We have been fools and we must pay therefore
With this dull life, and labour very sore
Until we die; yet are we grown too wise
Upon this earth to seek for Paradise;
Leave us, but ye may yet come back again
When ye have found your trouble nought and vain."

Well, in three days we left those men behind,
To dwell among the simple folk and kind,
Who were our guides at first, until that we
Reached the green hills clustered confusedly
About the mountains; then they turned, right glad
That till that time no horrors they had had;
But we still hopeful, making nought of time,
The rugged rocks now set ourselves to climb,
And lonely there for days and days and days
We stumbled through the blind and bitter ways,
Now rising to the never-melting snow,
Now beaten thence, and fain to try below
Another kingdom of that world of stone.
At last when all our means of life were gone,
And some of us had fallen in the fight
With cold and weariness, we came in sight
Of what we hungered for—what then—what then?
—A savage land, a land untilled again,
No lack of food while lasted shaft or bow,
But folk the worst of all we came to know;
Scarce like to men, yea, worse than most of beasts,
For of men slain they made their impious feasts.
These, as I deem for our fresh blood athirst,
From out the thick wood often on us burst.
Not heeding death, and in confused fight
We spent full many a wretched day and night,
That yet were happiest of the times we knew;
For with our grief such fearful foes we grew,
That Odin's gods had hardly scared men more
As fearless through the naked press we bore.

At first indeed some prisoners did we take,
Asking them questions for our fair land's sake,
Hoping 'gainst hope; but when in vain had been
Our questioning, and we one day had seen
Their way of banqueting, then axe and spear
Ended the wretched life and sullen fear
Of any wild man wounded in the fight.
So with the failing of our hoped delight
We grew to be like devils—then I knew
At my own cost, what each man cometh to
When every pleasure from his life is gone,
And hunger and desire of life alone,
That still beget dull rage and bestial fears,
Like gnawing serpents through the world he bears.
What time we spent there? nay, I do not know:
For happy folk no time can pass too slow
Because they die. Because at last they die
And are at rest, no time too fast can fly
For wretches: but eternity of woe
Had hemmed us in, and neither fast or slow
Passed the dull time as we held reckoning.
Yet midst so many a wretched, hopeless thing
One hope there was, if it was still a hope,
At least, at last, to turn, and scale the cope
Of those dread mountains we had clambered o'er.
And we did turn, and with what labour sore,
What thirst, what hunger, and what wretchedness
We struggled daily, how can words express?
Yet amidst all, the kind God led us on
Until at last a high raised pass we won
And like grey clouds afar beheld the sea,
And weakened with our toil and misery
Wept at that sight, that like a friend did seem
Forgotten long, beheld but in a dream
When we know not if we be still alive.
But thence descending, we with rocks did strive,
Till dwindled, worn, at last we reached the plain
And came unto our untaught friends again,
And those we left; who yet alive and well,
Wedded to brown wives, fain would have us tell
The story of our woes, which when they heard,
The country people wondered at our word,
But not our fellows; and so all being said
A little there we gathered lustihead,
Still talking over what was best to do.
And we the leaders yet were fain to go
From sea to sea and take what God might send,
Who at the worst our hopes and griefs would end
With that same death we once had hoped to stay,
Or even yet might send us such a day,
That our past troubles should but make us glad
As men rejoice in pensive songs and sad.
This was our counsel; those that we had left
Said, that they once before had been bereft
Of friends and country by a sick man's dream,
That this their life not evil did they deem

Nor would they rashly cast it down the wind;
But whoso wandered, they would stay behind.
Others there were who said, whate'er might come,
They would at least seek for the happy home
They had forgotten once, and there at last
In penitence for sins and follies past
Wait for the death that they in vain had fled.

Well, when all things by all sides had been said
We drew the ships again unto the sea,
Which those who went not with us, carefully
Had tended for those years we were away
(Which still they said was ten months and a day);
And these we rigged, and in a little while
The Fighting Man looked o'er the false sea's smile
Unto the land of Norway, and our band
Across the bulwarks of the Rose-Garland,
Amidst of tears and doubt and misery
Sent after them a feeble farewell cry,
And they returned a tremulous faint cheer,
While from the sandy shell-strewn beach anear
The soft west wind across the waves bore out
A strange confused noise of wail and shout,
For there the dark line of the outland folk
A few familiar grey-eyed faces broke,
That minded us of Norway left astern,
Ere we began our heavy task to learn.

THE ELDER OF THE CITY.

Sirs, by my deeming had ye still gone on
When ye had crossed the mountains, ye had won
Unto another sea at last, and there
Had found clad folk, and cities great and fair,
Though not the deathless country of your thought.

THE WANDERER.

Yea, sirs, and short of that we had deemed nought,
Ere yet our hope of life had fully died;
And for those cities scarce should we have tried,
E'en had we known of them, and certainly
Nought but those bestial people did we see.
But let me hasten now unto the end.

Fair wind and lovely weather God did send
To us deserted men, who but two score
Now mustered; so we stood off from the shore
Still stretching south till we lost land again,
Because we deemed the labour would be vain
To try the shore too near where we had been,
Where none of us as yet a sign had seen
Of that which we desired. And now we few,
Thus left alone, each unto other grew
The dearer friends, and less accursed we seemed
As still the less of 'scaping death we dreamed,
And knew the lot of all men should be ours,
A chequered day of sunshine and of showers
Fading to twilight and dark night at last.
Those forest folk with ours their lot had cast,
And ever unto us were leal and true,
And now when all our tongue at last they knew
They told us tales, too long to tell as now;
Yet this one thing I fain to you would show
About the dying man our sight did kill
Amidst the corpses on that dreary hill:
Namely, that when their king drew nigh to death,
But still had left in him some little breath,
They bore him to that hill, when they had slain,
By a wild root that killed with little pain,
His servants and his wives like as we saw,
Thinking that thence the gods his soul would draw
To heaven; but the king being dead at last,
The servants dead being taken down, they cast
Into the river, but the king they hung
Embalmed within that chapel, where they sung
Some office over him in solemn wise,
Amidst the smoke of plenteous sacrifice.

Well, though wild hope no longer in us burned,
Unto the land within a while we turned,
And found it much the same, and still untilled,
And still its people of all arts unskilled;
And some were dangerous and some were kind;
But midst them no more tidings did we find
Of what we once had deemed well won, but now
Was like the dream of some past kingly show.
What shall I say of all these savages,
Of these wide plains beset with unsown trees,
Through which untamed man-fearing beasts did range?
To us at least there seemed but little change,
For we were growing weary of the world.
Whiles did we dwell ashore, whiles were we hurled
Out to the landless ocean, whiles we lay
Long time within some river or deep bay;
And so the months went by, until at last,
When now three years were fully overpast
Since we had left our fellows, and grown old
Our leaky ship along the water rolled,
Upon a day unto a land we came
Whose people spoke a tongue well-nigh the same
As that our forest people used, and who
A little of the arts of mankind knew,
And tilled the kind earth, certes not in vain;
For wealth of melons we saw there, and grain
Strange unto us. Now battered as we were,
Grown old before our time, in worn-out gear,
These people, when we first set foot ashore,
Garlands of flowers and fruits unto us bore,
And worshipped us as gods, and for no words
That we could say would cease to call us lords,
And pray our help to give them bliss and peace,
And fruitful seasons of the earth's increase.

Withal at last, they, when in talk they fell
With our good forest-folk, to them did tell
That they were subject to a mighty king,
Who, as they said, ruled over everything,
And, dwelling in a glorious city, had
All things that men desire to make them glad.
"He," said they, "none the less shall be but slave
Unto your lords, and all that he may have
Will he but take as free gifts at their hands,
If they will deign henceforth to bless his lands
With their most godlike presence."
Ye can think
How we poor wretched souls outworn might shrink
From such strange worship, that like mocking seemed
To us, who of a godlike state had dreamed,
And missed it in such wise; yet none the less
An earthly haven to our wretchedness
This city seemed, therefore we 'gan to pray
That some of them would guide us on our way,
Which words of ours they heard most joyously,
And brought us to their houses nigh the sea,
And feasted us with such things as they might.
But almost ere the ending of the night
We started on our journey, being up-borne
In litters, like to kings, who so forlorn
Had been erewhile; so in some ten days' space
They brought us nigh their king's abiding place;
And as we went the land seemed fair enough,
Though sometimes did we pass through forests rough,
Deserts and fens, yet for the most the way
Through ordered villages and tilled land lay,
Which after all the squalid miseries
We had beheld, seemed heaven unto our eyes,
Though strange to us it was.
But now when we
From a hill-side the city well could see,
Our guides there prayed us to abide awhile,
Wherefore we stayed, though eager to beguile
Our downcast hearts from brooding o'er our woe
By all the new things that abode might show;
So while we bided on that flowery down
The swiftest of them sped on toward the town
To bear them news of this unhoped-for bliss;
And we, who now some little happiness
Could find in that fair place and pleasant air,
Sat 'neath strange trees, on new flowers growing there,
Of scent unlike to those we knew of old,
While unfamiliar tales the strange birds told.
But certes seemed that city fair enow
That spread out o'er the well-tilled vale below,
Though nowise built like such as we had seen;
Walled with white walls it was, and gardens green
Were set between the houses everywhere;
And now and then rose up a tower foursquare
Lessening in stage on stage: with many a hue
The house walls glowed, of red and green and blue,
And some with gold were well adorned, and one
From roofs of gold flashed back the noontide sun.
Had we but seen such things not long ago
We should have hastened us to come thereto,
In hope to find the very heaven we sought.
But now while quietly we sat, and thought
Of many things, the gate wherein that road
Had end, was opened wide, and thereout flowed
A glittering throng of people, young and old,
And men and women, much adorned with gold;
Wherefore we rose to meet them, who stood still
When they beheld us winding down the hill,
And lined both sides of the grey road, but we
Now drawing nigh them, first of all could see
Old men in venerable raiment clad,
White-bearded, who sweet flowering branches had
In their right hands, then young men armed right well
After their way, which now were long to tell;
Then damsels clad in radiant gold array,
Who with sweet-smelling blossoms strewed the way
Before our feet; then men with gleaming swords
And glittering robes, and crowned like mighty lords;
And last of all, within the very gate
The king himself, round whom our guides did wait,
Kneeling with humble faces downward bent.
What wonder if, as 'twixt these folk we went,
Hearkening their singing and sweet minstrelsy,
A little nigher now seemed our heaven to be—
Alas, a fair folk, a sweet spot of earth,
A land where many a lovely thing has birth,
But where all fair things come at last to die.
Now when we three unto the king drew nigh
Before our fellows, he, adored of all,
Spared not before us on his knees to fall,
And as we deemed, who knew his speech but ill,
Began to pray us to bide with him still,
Telling withal of some old prophecy
Which seemed to say that there we should not die.
What could we do amidst these splendid lords?
No time it was to doubt or make long words,
Nor with a short but happy life at hand
Durst we to ask about the deathless land,
Though well we felt the life whereof he spoke,
Could never be among those mortal folk.
Therefore we way-worn, disappointed men,
So richly dowered with three-score years and ten,
Vouchsafed to grant the king his whole request;
Thinking within that town awhile to rest,
And gather news about the hope that fled
Still on before us, risen from the dead,
From out its tomb of toil and misery,
That held it while we saw but sea and sky,
Or untilled lands and people void of bliss,
And our own faces heavy with distress.

But entering now that town, what huge delight
We had therein, how lovely to our sight
Was the well-ordered life of people there,
Who on that night within a palace fair
Made us a feast with great solemnity,
Till we forgot that we came there to die,
If we should leave our quest; for e'en as kings
They treated us, and whatsoever things
We asked for, or could think of, those were ours.
Houses we had, noble with walls and towers,
Lovely with gardens, cooled with running streams,
And rich with gold beyond a miser's dreams,
And men and women slaves, whose very lives
Were in our hands; and fair and princely wives
If so we would; and all things for delight,
Good to the taste or beautiful to sight
The land might yield. They taught us of their law;
The muster of their men-at-arms we saw,
As men who owned them; in their judgment-place
Our lightest word made glad the pleader's face,
And the judge trembled at our faintest frown.
Think then, if we, late driven up and down
Upon the uncertain sea, or struggling sore
With barbarous men upon an untilled shore,
Or at the best, midst people ignorant
Of arts and letters, fighting against want
Of very food—think if we now were glad
From day to day, and as folk crazed and mad
Deemed our old selves, the wanderers on the sea.
And if at whiles midst our felicity
We yet remembered us of that past day
When in the long swell off the land we lay,
Weeping for joy at our accomplished dream,
And each to each a very god did seem,
For fear was dead—if we remembered this,
Yet after all, was this our life of bliss,
A little thing that we had gained at last?
And must we sorrow for the idle past,
Or think it ill that thither we were led?
Thus seemed our old desire quite quenched and dead.
You must remember that we yet were young.
Five years had passed since the grey fieldfare sung
To me a dreaming youth laid 'neath the thorn;
And though while we were wandering and forlorn
I seemed grown old and withered suddenly,
But twenty summers had I seen go by
When I left Wickland on that desperate cruise.
But now again our wrinkles did we lose
With memory of our ills, and like a dream
Our fevered quest with its bad days did seem,
And many things grew fresh again, forgot
While in our hearts that wild desire was hot:
Yea, though at thought of Norway we might sigh,
Small was the pain which that sweet memory
Brought with its images seen fresh and clear,
And many an old familiar thing grown dear,
But little loved the while we lived with it.

So smoothly o'er our heads the days did flit,
Yet not eventless either, for we taught
Such lore as we from our own land had brought
Unto this folk, who when they wrote must draw
Such draughts as erst at Micklegarth I saw,
Writ for the evil Pharaoh-kings of old;
Their arms were edged with copper or with gold,
Whereof they had great plenty, or with flint;
No armour had they fit to bear the dint
Of tools like ours, and little could avail
Their archer craft; their boats knew nought of sail,
And many a feat of building could we show,
Which midst their splendour still they did not know.
And midst of all, war fell upon the land,
And in forefront of battle must we stand,
To do our best, though little mastery
We thought it then to make such foemen flee
As there we met; but when again we came
Into the town, with something like to shame
We took the worship of that simple folk
Rejoicing for their freedom from the yoke
That round about their necks had hung so long.
For thus that war began: some monarch strong
Conquered their land of old, and thereon laid
A dreadful tribute, which they still had paid
With tears and curses; for as each fifth year
Came round, this heavy shame they needs must bear:
Ten youths, ten maidens must they choose by lot
Among the fairest that they then had got,
Who a long journey o'er the hills must go
Unto the tyrant, nor with signs of woe
Enter his city, but in bright array,
And harbingered by songs and carols gay,
Betake them to the temple of his god;
But when the streets their weary feet had trod
Their wails must crown the long festivity,
For on the golden altar must they die.
Such was the sentence till the year we came,
And counselled them to put away this shame
If they must die therefore; so on that year
Barren of blood the devil's altars were,
Wherefore a herald clad in strange attire
The tyrant sent them, and but blood and fire
His best words were; him they sent back again
Defied by us, who made his threats but vain,
When face to face with those ill folk we stood
Ready to seal our counsel with our blood.
Past all belief they loved us for all this,
And if it would have added to our bliss
That they should die, this surely they had done.
So smoothly slipped the years past one by one,

And we had lived and died as happy there
As any men the labouring earth may bear,
But for the poison of that wickedness
That led us on God's edicts to redress.
At first indeed death seemed so far away,
So sweet in our new home, was every day,
That we forgot death like the most of men
Who cannot count the threescore years and ten;
Yet we grew fearful as the time drew on,
And needs must think of all we might have won,
Yea, by so much the happier that we were
By just so much increased on us our fear,
And those old times of our past misery
Seemed not so evil as the days went by
Faster and faster with the years' increase,
For loss of youth to us was loss of peace.

Two gates unto the road of life there are,
And to the happy youth both seem afar,
Both seem afar; so far the past one seems,
The gate of birth, made dim with many dreams,
Bright with remembered hopes, beset with flowers;
So far it seems he cannot count the hours
That to this midway path have led him on
Where every joy of life now seemeth won—
So far, he thinks not of the other gate,
Within whose shade the ghosts of dead hopes wait
To call upon him as he draws anear,
Despoiled, alone, and dull with many a fear,
"Where is thy work? how little thou hast done,
Where are thy friends, why art thou so alone?"
How shall he weigh his life? slow goes the time
The while the fresh dew-sprinkled hill we climb,
Thinking of what shall be the other side;
Slow pass perchance the minutes we abide
On the gained summit, blinking at the sun;
But when the downward journey is begun
No more our feet may loiter; past our ears
Shrieks the harsh wind scarce noted midst our fears,
And battling with the hostile things we meet
Till, ere we know it, our weak shrinking feet
Have brought us to the end, and all is done.

And so with us it was, when youth twice won
Now for the second time had passed away,
And we unwitting were grown old and grey,
And one by one, the death of some dear friend,
Some cherished hope, brought to a troublous end
Our joyous life; as in a dawn of June
The lover, dreaming of the brown bird's tune
And longing lips unto his own brought near,
Wakes up the crashing thunder-peal to hear.
So, sirs, when this world's pleasures came to nought,
Not upon God we set our wayward thought,
But on the folly our own hearts had made;
Once more the stories of the past we weighed
With what we hitherto had found; once more
We longed to be by some unknown far shore;
Once more our life seemed trivial, poor, and vain,
Till we our lost fool's paradise might gain.
Yea, we were like the felon doomed to die,
Who when unto the sword he draws anigh
Struggles and cries, though erewhile in his cell
He heard the priest of heaven and pardon tell,
Weeping and half contented to be slain.

Was I the first who thought of this again?
Perchance I was; but howsoe'er that be
Long time I thought of these things certainly
Ere I durst stir my fellows to the quest,
Though secretly myself with little rest
For tidings of our lovely land I sought.
Should prisoners from another folk be brought
Unto our town, I questioned them of this;
I asked the wandering merchants of a bliss
They dreamed not of, in chaffering for their goods;
The hunter in the far-off lonely woods,
The fisher in the rivers nigh the sea,
Must tell their wild strange stories unto me.
Within the temples books of records lay
Such as I told of, thereon day by day
I pored, and got long stories from the priests
Of many-handed gods with heads of beasts,
And such-like dreariness; and still, midst all
Sometimes a glimmering light would seem to fall
Upon my ignorance, and less content
As time went on I grew, and ever went
About my daily life distractedly,
Until at last I felt that I must die
Or to my fellows tell what in me was.
So on a day I came to Nicholas
And trembling 'gan to tell of this and that,
And as I spoke with downcast eyes I sat
Fearing to see some scorn within his eyes,
Or horror at unhappy memories;
But now, when mine eyes could no longer keep
The tears from falling, he too, nigh to weep,
Spoke out, "O Rolf, why hast thou come to me,
Who thinking I was happy, now must see
That only with the ending of our breath,
Or by that fair escape from fear and death
Can we forget the hope that erewhile led
Our little band to woe and drearihead?
But now are we grown old, Rolf, and to-day
Life is a little thing to cast away,
Nor can we suffer many years of it
If all goes wrong; so no more will I sit,
Praying for all the things that cannot be:
Tell thou our fellows what thou tellest me,
Nor fear that I will leave you in your need."
Well, sirs, with all the rest I had such speed
That men enough of us resolved to go
The very bitterness of death to know

Or else to conquer him; some idle tale
With our kind hosts would plenteously avail,
For of our quest we durst not tell them aught;
Since something more than doubt was in our thought,
Though unconfessed, that we should fail at last;
Nor had we quite forgot our perils past.

Alas! can weak men hide such thoughts as these?
I think the summer wind that bows the trees
Through which the dreamer wandereth muttering
Will bear abroad some knowledge of the thing
That so consumes him. Howsoe'er that be,
We, born to drink the dregs of misery,
Found in the end that some one knew our aim.
For while we weighed the chances of the game
That we must play, nor yet knew what to shun,
Or what to do, there came a certain one,
A young man strange within the place, to me,
Who, swearing me at first to secrecy,
Began to tell me of the hoped-for land.
The trap I saw not, with a shaking hand
And beating heart, unto the notes of years
I turned, long parchments blotted with my tears,
And tremulously read them out aloud;
But still, because the hurrying thoughts would crowd
My whirling brain, scarce heard the words I read.
Yet in the end it seemed that what he said
Tallied with that, heaped up so painfully.
Now listen! this being done, he said to me,
"O godlike Eastern man, believest thou
That I who look so young and ruddy now
Am very old? because in sooth I come
To seek thee and to lead thee to our home
With all thy fellows. But if thou dost not,
Come now with me, for nigh unto this spot
My brother, left behind, an ancient man
Now dwelleth, but as grey-haired, weak and wan
As I am fresh; of me he doth not know,
So surely shall our speech together show,
The truth of this my message." "Yea," said I,
"I doubt thee not, yet would I certainly
Hear the old man talk if he liveth yet,
That I a clearer tale of this may set
Before my fellows; come then, lead me there."
Thus easily I fell into the snare;
For as along the well-known streets we went,
An old hoar man there met us, weak and bent,
Who staying us, the while with age he shook,
My lusty fellow by the shoulder took,
And said, "Oh, stranger, canst thou be the son,
Or but the younger double of such an one,
Who dwelt once in the weaver's street hereby?"
But the young man looked on him lovingly,
And said, "O certes, thou art now grown old
That thou thy younger brother canst behold
And call him stranger." "Yea, yea, old enow,"
The other said, "what fables talkest thou?
My brother has but three years less than I,
Nor dealeth time with men so marvellously
That he should seem like twenty, I fourscore:
Thou art my nephew, let the jest pass o'er."
"Nay," said he, "but it is not good to talk
Here in the crowded street, so let us walk
Unto thine habitation; dost thou mind,
When we were boys, how once we chanced to find
That crock of copper money hid away
Up in the loft, and how on that same day
We bought this toy and that, thou a short sword
And I a brazen boat."
But at that word
The old man wildly on him 'gan to stare
And said no more, the while we three did fare
Unto his house, but there we being alone,
Many undoubted signs the younger one
Gave to his brother, saying withal, that he
Had gained the land of all felicity,
Where, after trials too long then to tell,
The slough of grisly eld from off him fell,
And left him strong, and fair, and young again;
Neither from that time had he suffered pain
Greater or less, or feared at all to die:
And though, he said, he knew not certainly
If he should live for ever, this he knew
His days should not be full of pain and few
As most men's lives were. Now when asked why he
Had left his home, a deadly land to see,
He said that people's chiefs had sent him there,
Moved by report that tall men, white and fair,
Like to the Gods, had come across the sea,
Of whom old seers had told that they should be
Lords of that land; therefore his charge was this,
To lead us forth to that abode of bliss,
But secretly, since for the other folk
They were as beasts to toil beneath the yoke.
"But," said he, "brother, thou shalt go with me,
If now at last no doubt be left in thee
Of who I am."
At that, to end it all
The weak old man upon his neck did fall,
Rejoicing for his lot with many tears:
But I, rejoicing too, yet felt vague fears
Within my heart, for now almost too nigh
We seemed to that long-sought felicity.
What should I do though? What could it avail
Unto these men, to make a feigned tale?
Besides in all no faltering could I find,
Nor did they go beyond, or fall behind,
What in such cases such-like men would do,
Therefore I needs must think their story true.
So now unto my fellows did I go
And all things in due order straight did show,

And had the man who told the tale at hand;
Of whom some made great question of the land,
And where it was, and how he found it first;
And still he answered boldly to the worst
Of all their questions: then from out the place
He went, and we were left there face to face.
And joy it was to see the dark cheeks, tanned
By many a summer of that fervent land,
Flush up with joy, and see the grey eyes gleam
Through the dull film of years, as that sweet dream
Flickered before them, now grown real and true.
But when the certainty of all we knew,
Deeming for sure our quest would not be vain,
We got us ready for the sea again.
But to the city's folk we told no more
Than that we needs must make for some far shore,
Whence we would come again to them, and bring
For them and us full many a wished-for thing
To make them glad.
Then answered they indeed
That our departing made their hearts to bleed,
But with no long words did they bid us stay.
And I remembered me of that past day,
And somewhat grieved I felt, that so it was:
Not thinking how the deeds of men must pass,
And their remembrance as their bodies die.
Or, if their memories fade not utterly,
Like curious pictures shall they be at best,
For men to gaze at while they sit at rest,
Talking of alien things and feasting well.

Ah me! I loiter, being right loth to tell
The things that happened to us in the end.
Down to the noble river did we wend
Where lay the ships we taught these folk to make,
And there the fairest of them did we take
And so began our voyage; thirty-three
Were left of us, who erst had crossed the sea,
Five of the forest people, and beside
None but the fair young man, our new-found guide,
And his old brother; setting sail with these
We left astern our gilded palaces
And all the good things God had given us there
With small regret, however good they were.
Well, in twelve days our vessel reached the sea,
When turning round we ran on northerly
In sight of land at whiles; what need to say
How the time past from hopeful day to day?
Suffice it that the wind was fair and good,
And we most joyful, as still north we stood;
Until when we a month at sea had been,
And for six days no land at all had seen,
We sighted it once more, whereon our guide
Shouted, "O fellows, lay all fear aside,
This is the land whereof I spake to you."
But when the happy tidings all men knew,
Trembling and pale we watched the land grow great,
And when above the waves the noontide heat
Had raised a vapour 'twixt us and the land
That afternoon, we saw a high ness stand
Out in the sea, and nigher when we came,
And all the sky with sunset was a-flame,
'Neath the dark hill we saw a city lie,
Washed by the waves, girt round with ramparts high.
A little nigher yet, and then our guide
Bade us to anchor, lowering from our side
The sailless keel wherein he erst had come,
Through many risks, to bring us to his home.
But when our eager hands this thing had done,
He and his brother gat therein alone.
But first he said, "Abide here till the morn,
And when ye hear the sound of harp and horn,
And varied music, run out every oar,
Up anchor, and make boldly for the shore.
O happy men! well-nigh do I regret
That I am not as you, to whom as yet
That moment past all moments is unknown,
When first unending life to you is shown.
But now I go, that all in readiness
May be, your souls with this delight to bless."
He waved farewell to us and went, but we,
As the night grew, beheld across the sea
Lights moving on the quays, and now and then
We heard the chanting of the outland men.
How can I tell of that strange troublous night?
Troublous and strange, though 'neath the moonshine white,
Peace seemed upon the sea, the glimmering town,
The shadows of the tree-besprinkled down,
The moveless dewy folds of our loose sail;
But how could these for peace to us avail?
Weary with longing, blind with great amaze,
We struggled now with past and future days;
And not in vain our former joy we thought,
Since thirty years our wandering feet had brought
To this at last—and yet, what will you have?
Can man be made content? We wished to save
The bygone years; our hope, our painted toy,
We feared to miss, drowned in that sea of joy.
Old faces still reproached us: "We are gone,
And ye are entering into bliss alone;
And can ye now forget? Year passes year,
And still ye live on joyous, free from fear;
But where are we? where is the memory
Of us, to whom ye once were drawn so nigh
Forgetting and alone ye enter in;
Remembering all, alone we wail our sin,
And cannot touch you."—Ah, the blessed pain!
When heaven just gained was scarcely all a gain.

How could we weigh that boundless treasure then,
Or count the sorrows of the sons of men?
—Ah, woe is me to think upon that night!

Day came, and with the dawning of the light
We were astir, and from our deck espied
The people clustering by the water-side,
As if to meet us; then across the sea
We heard great horns strike up triumphantly,
And then, scarce knowing what we did, we weighed
And running out the oars for shore we made,
With banners fluttering out from yard and mast.
We reached the well-built marble quays at last,
Crowded with folk, and in the front of these
There stood our guide, decked out with braveries,
Holding his feeble brother by the hand,
Then speechless, trembling, did we now take land,
Leaving all woes behind, but when our feet
The happy soil of that blest land did meet,
Fast fell our tears, as on a July day
The thunder-shower falls pattering on the way,
And certes some one we desired to bless,
But scarce knew whom midst all our thankfulness.
Now the crowd opened, and an ordered band
Of youths and damsels, flowering boughs in hand,
Came forth to meet us, just as long ago,
When first we won some rest from pain and woe,
Except that now eld chained not any one,
No man was wrinkled but ourselves alone,
But smooth and beautiful, bright-eyed and glad,
Were all we saw, in fair thin raiment clad
Fit for the sunny place.
But now our friend,
Our guide, who brought us to this glorious end,
Led us amidst that band, who 'gan to sing
Some hymn of welcome, midst whose carolling
Faint-hearted men we must have been indeed
To doubt that all was won; nor did we heed
That, when we well were gotten from the quay,
Armed men went past us, by the very way
That we had come, nor thought of their intent,
For armour unto us was ornament,
And had been now, for many peaceful years,
Since bow and axe had dried the people's tears.
Let all that pass—with song and minstrelsy
Through many streets they led us, fair to see;
For nowhere did we meet maimed, poor, or old,
But all were young and clad in silk and gold.
Like a king's court the common ways did seem
On that fair morn of our accomplished dream.
Far did we go, through market-place and square,
Past fane and palace, till a temple fair
We came to, set aback midst towering trees,
But raised above the tallest of all these.
So there we entered through a brazen gate,
And all the thronging folk without did wait,
Except the golden-clad melodious band.
But when within the precinct we did stand,
Another rampart girdled round the fane,
And that being past another one again,
And small space was betwixt them, all these three
Of white stones laid in wondrous masonry
Were builded, but the fourth we now passed through
Was half of white and half of ruddy hue;
Nor did we reach the temple through this one,
For now a fifth wall came, of dark red stone
With golden coping and wide doors of gold;
And this being past, our eyes could then behold
The marvellous temple, foursquare, rising high
In stage on stage up toward the summer sky,
Like the unfinished tower that Nimrod built
Before the concord of the world was spilt.
So now we came into the lowest hall,
A mighty way across from wall to wall,
Where carven pillars held a gold roof up,
And silver walls fine as an Indian cup,
With figures monstrous as a dream were wrought;
And under foot the floor beyond all thought
Was wonderful, for like the tumbling sea
Beset with monsters did it seem to be;
But in the midst a pool of ruddy gold
Caught in its waves a glittering fountain cold,
And through the bright shower of its silver spray
Dimly we saw the high-raised daïs, gay
With wondrous hangings, for high up and small
The windows were within the dreamlike hall;
Betwixt the pillars wandered damsels fair
Crooning low songs, or filling all the air
With incense wafted to strange images
That made us tremble, since we saw in these
The devils unto whom we now must cry
Ere we begin our new felicity:
Nathless no altars did we see but one,
Which dimly from before the daïs shone
Built of green stone, with horns of copper bright.
Now when we entered from the outer light
And all the scents of the fresh day were past,
With its sweet breezes, a dull shade seemed cast
Over our joy; what then? not if we would
Could we turn back—and surely all was good.
But now they brought us vestments rich and fair,
And bade us our own raiment put off there,
Which straight we did, and with a hollow sound
Like mournful bells our armour smote the ground,
And damsels took the weapons from our hands
That might have gleamed with death in other lands,
And won us praise; at last when all was done,
And brighter than the Kaiser each man shone,
Us unarmed helpless men the music led
Up to the daïs, and there our old guide said,

"Rest, happy men, the time will not be long
Ere they will bring with incense, dance, and song
The sacred cup, your life and happiness,
And many a time this fair hour shall ye bless."

Alas, sirs! words are weak to tell of it,
I seemed to see a smile of mockery flit
Across his face as from our thrones he turned,
And in my heart a sudden fear there burned,
The last, I said, for ever and a day;
But even then with harsh and ominous bray
A trumpet through the monstrous pillars rung,
And to our feet with sudden fear we sprung—
Too late, too late! for through all doors did stream
Armed men, that filled the place with clash and gleam,
And when the dull sound of their moving feet
Was still, a fearful sight our eyes did meet,
A fearful sight to us—*old men and grey*
Betwixt the bands of soldiers took their way,
And at their head in wonderful attire,
Holding within his hand a pot of fire,
Moved the false brother of the traitorous guide,
Who with bowed head walked ever by his side;
But as anigh the elders 'gan to draw,
We, almost turned to stone by what we saw,
Heard the old man say to the younger one,
"Speak to them that thou knowest, O fair *Son!*"
Then the wretch said, "O ye, who sought to find
Unending life against the law of kind,
Within this land, fear ye not now too much,
For no man's hand your bodies here shall touch,
But rather with all reverence folk shall tend
Your daily lives, until at last they end
By slow decay: and ye shall pardon us
The trap whereby beings made so glorious
As ye are made, we drew unto this place.
Rest ye content then! for although your race
Comes from the Gods, yet are ye conquered here,
As we would conquer them, if we knew where
They dwell from day to day, and with what arms
We, overcoming them, might win such charms
That we might make the world what ye desire.
"Rest then at ease, and if ye e'er shall tire
Of this abode, remember at the worst
Life flitteth, whether it be blest or cursed.
But will ye tire? ye are our gods on earth
Whiles that ye live, nor shall your lives lack mirth,
For song, fair women, and heart-cheering wine
The chain of solemn days shall here entwine
With odorous flowers; ah, surely ye are come,
When all is said, unto an envied home."

Like an old dream, dreamed in another dream,
I hear his voice now, see the hopeless gleam,
Through the dark place of that thick wood of spears.
That fountain's splash rings yet within mine ears,
I thought the fountain of eternal youth—
Yet I can scarce remember in good truth
What then I felt: I should have felt as he,
Who, waking after some festivity
Sees a dim land, and things unspeakable,
And comes to know at last that it is hell—
I cannot tell you, nor can tell you why
Driven by what hope, I cried my battle-cry
And rushed upon him; this I know indeed
My naked hands were good to me at need,
That sent the traitor to his due reward,
Ere I was dragged off by the hurrying guard,
Who spite of all used neither sword nor spear,
Nay as it seemed, touched us with awe and fear.
Though at the last grown all too weak to strive
They brought us to the daïs scarce alive,
And changed our tattered robes again, and there
Bound did we sit, each in his golden chair,
Beholding many mummeries that they wrought
About the altar; till at last they brought,
Crowned with fair flowers, and clad in robes of gold,
The folk that from the wood we won of old—
Why make long words? before our very eyes
Our friends they slew, a fitting sacrifice
To us their new gained gods, who sought to find
Within that land, a people just and kind,
That could not die, or take away the breath
From living men.
What thing but that same death
Had we left now to hope for? death must come
And find us somewhere an enduring home.
Will grief kill men, as some folk think it will?
Then are we of all men most hard to kill.
The time went past, the dreary days went by
In dull unvarying round of misery,
Nor can I tell if it went fast or slow,
What would it profit you the time to know
That we spent there; all I can say to you
Is, that no hope our prison wall shone through,
That ever we were guarded carefully,
While day and dark, and dark and day went by
Like such a dream, as in the early night
The sleeper wakes from in such sore affright,
Such panting horror, that to sleep again
He will not turn, to meet such shameful pain.

Lo such were we, but as we hoped before
Where no hope was, so now, when all seemed o'er
But sorrow for our lives so cast away,
Again the bright sun brought about the day.
At last the temple's dull monotony
Was broke by noise of armed men hurrying by
Within the precinct, and we seemed to hear
Shouts from without of anger and of fear,
And noises as of battle; and red blaze
The night sky showed; this lasted through two days.

But on the third our guards were whispering
Pale-faced, as though they feared some coming thing,
And when the din increased about noontide,
No longer there with us would they abide,
But left us free; judge then if our hearts beat,
When any pain, or death itself was sweet
To hideous life within that wicked place,
Where every day brought on its own disgrace.
Few words betwixt us passed, we knew indeed
Where our old armour once so good at need
Hung up as relics nigh the altar-stead;
Thither we hurried, and from heel to head
Soon were we armed, and our old spears and swords
Clashing 'gainst steel and stone, spoke hopeful words
To us, the children of a warrior race.
But round unto the hubbub did we face
And through the precinct strove to make our way
Set close together; in besmirched array
Some met us, and some wounded very sore,
And some who wounded men to harbour bore;
But these too busy with their pain or woe
To note us much, unchallenged let us go:
Then here and there we passed some shrinking maid
In a dark corner trembling and afraid,
But eager for the news about the fight.
Through trodden gardens then we came in sight
Of the third rampart that begirt the fane,
Which now the foemen seemed at point to gain,
For o'er the wall the ladders 'gan to show,
And huge confusion was there down below
'Twixt wall and wall; but as the gate we passed
A man from out the crowd came hurrying fast,
But, drawing nigh us, stopped short suddenly,
And cried, "O, masters, help us or we die!
This impious people 'gainst their ancient lords
Have turned, and in their madness drawn their swords,
Yea, and they now prevail, and fearing not
The dreadful gods still grows their wrath more hot.
Wherefore to bring you here was my intent,
But the kind gods themselves your hands have sent
To save us all, and this fair holy house
With your strange arms, and hearts most valorous."
No word we said, for even as he spoke
A frightful clamour from the wall outbroke,
As the thin line of soldiers thereupon
Crushed back, and broken, left the rampart won,
And leapt and tumbled therefrom as they could,
While in their place the conquering foemen stood:
Then the weak, wavering, huddled crowd below
Their weight upon the inner wall 'gan throw,
And at the narrow gates by hundreds died;
For not long did the enemy abide
On the gained rampart, but by every way
Got to the ground and 'gan all round to slay,
Till great and grim the slaughter grew to be.
But we well pleased our tyrants' end to see
Still firm against the inner wall did stand,
While round us surged the press on either hand.
Nor did we fear, for what was left of life
For us to fear for? so at last the strife
Drawn inward, in that place did much abate,
And we began to move unto the gate
Betwixt the dead and living; and these last
Ever with fearful glances by us passed
Nor hindered aught; but mindful of the lore
Our fathers gained on many a bloody shore,
We, when unto the street we made our way,
Moved as in fight nor broke our close array,
Though no man harmed us of the troubled crowd
That thronged the streets with shouts and curses loud.
But rather when our clashing arms they heard
Their hubbub lulled, and they as men afeard
Drew back before us.
Well, as nigh we drew
Unto the sea, the men showed sparse and few,
Though frightened women standing in the street
Before their doors we did not fail to meet,
And passed by folk who at their doors laid down
Men wounded in the fight; so through the town
We reached the unguarded water-gate at last,
And there, nigh weeping, saw the green waves cast
Against the quays, whereby five tall ships lay:
For in that devil's house, right many a day
Had passed with all its dull obscenity
Uncounted by us while we longed to die;
And while of all men we were out of sight,
Except those priests, the people as they might
Made ships like ours; in whose new handiwork
Few mariners and fearful now did lurk,
And these soon fled before us: therefore we
Stayed not to think, but running hastily
Down the lone quay, seized on the nighest ship,
Nor yet till we had let the hawser slip
Dared we be glad, and then indeed once more,
Though we no longer hoped for our fair shore,
Our past disgrace, worse than the very hell,
Though hope was dead, made things seem more than well;
For if we died that night, yet were we free.
Ah! with what joy we sniffed the fresh salt sea
After the musky odours of that place;
With what delight each felt upon his face

The careless wind, our master and our slave,
As through the green seas fast from shore we drave,
Scarce witting where we went.
But now when we
Beheld that city, far across the sea,
A thing gone past, nor any more could hear
The mingled shouts of victory and of fear,
From out the midst thereof shot up a fire
In a long, wavering, murky, smoke-capped spire
That still with every minute wider grew,
So that the ending of the place we knew
Where we had passed such days of misery,
And still more glad turned round unto the sea.

My tale grows near its ending, for we stood
Southward to our kind folk e'en as we could,
But made slow way, for ever heavily
Our ship sailed, and she often needs must lie
At anchor in some bay, the while with fear
Ourselves, we followed up the fearful deer,
Or filled our water-vessels; for indeed,
Of meat and drink were we in bitter need,
As well might be, for scarcely could we choose
What ship from off that harbour to cast loose.
Midst this there died the captain, Nicholas,
Whom, though he brought us even to this pass,
I loved the most of all men; even now
When that seems long past, I can scarce tell how
I bear to live, since he could live no more.
Certes he took our failure very sore,
And often do I think he fain had died,
But yet for very love must needs abide
A little while, and yet a while again,
As though to share the utmost of our pain,
And miss the ray of comfort and sweet rest
Wherewith ye end our long disastrous quest—
—A drearier place than ever heretofore
The world seemed, as from that far nameless shore
We turned and left him 'neath the trees to bide;
For midst our rest worn out at last he died.
And such seemed like to hap to us as well,
If any harder thing to us befell
Than was our common life; and still we talked
How our old friends would meet men foiled, and balked
Of all the things that were to make them glad;
Ah, sirs! no sight of them henceforth we had;
A wind arose, which blowing furiously
Drove us out helpless to the open sea;
Eight days it blew, and when it fell, we lay
Leaky, dismasted, a most helpless prey
To winds and waves, and with but little food.
Then with hard toil a feeble sail and rude
We rigged up somehow, and nigh hopelessly,
Expecting death, we staggered o'er the sea
For ten days more, but when all food and drink
Were gone for three days, and we needs must think
That in mid ocean we were doomed to die,
One morn again did land before us lie:
And we rejoiced; as much at least as he,
Who tossing on his bed deliriously,
Tortured with pain, hears the physician say
That he shall have one quiet painless day
Before he dies—What more? we soon did stand
In this your peaceful and delicious land
Amongst the simple kindly country folk,
But when I heard the language that they spoke,
From out my heart a joyous cry there burst,
So sore for friendly words was I athirst,
And I must fall a-weeping, to have come
To such a place that seemed a blissful home,
After the tossing from rough sea to sea;
So weak at last, so beaten down were we.
What shall I say in these kind people's praise
Who treated us like brothers for ten days,
Till with their tending we grew strong again,
And then withal in country cart and wain
Brought us unto this city where we are;
May God be good to them for all their care.
And now, sirs, all our wanderings have ye heard,
And all our story to the utmost word;
And here hath ending all our foolish quest,
Not at the worst, if hardly at the best,
Since ye are good—Sirs, we are old and grey
Before our time; in what coin shall we pay
For this your goodness; take it not amiss
That we, poor souls, must pay you back for this
As good men pay back God, Who, raised above
The heavens and earth, yet needeth earthly love.

THE ELDER OF THE CITY.

Oh, friends, content you! this is much indeed,
And we are paid, thus garnering for our need
Your blessings only, bringing in their train
God's blessings as the south wind brings the rain.
And for the rest, no little thing shall be
(Since ye through all yet keep your memory)
The gentle music of the bygone years,
Long past to us with all their hopes and fears.
Think, if the gods, who mayhap love us well,
Sent to our gates some ancient chroniele
Of that sweet unforgotten land long left,
Of all the lands wherefrom we now are reft—
—Think, with what joyous hearts, what reverence,
What songs, what sweet flowers we should bring it thence,
What images would guard it, what a shrine
Above its well-loved black and white should shine!
How should it pay our labour day by day
To look upon the fair place where it lay;

With what rejoicings even should we take
Each well-writ copy that the scribes might make,
And bear them forth to hear the people's shout,
E'en as good rulers' children are borne out
To take the people's blessing on their birth,
When all the city falls to joy and mirth.

Such, sirs, are ye, our living chronicle,
And scarce can we be grieved at what befell
Your lives in that too hopeless quest of yours,
Since it shall bring us wealth of happy hours
Whiles that we live, and to our sons, delight,
And their sons' sons.

But now, sirs, let us go,
That we your new abodes with us may show,
And tell you what your life henceforth may be,
But poor, alas, to that ye hoped to see.

THINK, listener, that I had the luck to stand,
Awhile ago within a flowery land,
Fair beyond words; that thence I brought away
Some blossoms that before my footsteps lay,
Not plucked by me, not over-fresh or bright;
Yet, since they minded me of that delight,
Within the pages of this book I laid
Their tender petals, there in peace to fade.
Dry are they now, and void of all their scent
And lovely colour, yet what once was meant
By these dull stains, some men may yet descry
As dead upon the quivering leaves they lie.
Behold them here, and mock me if you will,
But yet believe no scorn of men can kill
My love of that fair land wherefrom they came,
Where midst the grass their petals once did flame.

Moreover, since that land as ye should know,
Bears not alone the gems for summer's show,
Or gold and pearls for fresh green-coated spring,
Or rich adornment for the flickering wing
Of fleeting autumn, but hath little fear
For the white conqueror of the fruitful year;
So in these pages month by month I show
Some portion of the flowers that erst did blow
In lovely meadows of the varying land,
Wherein erewhile I had the luck to stand.

MARCH.

SLAYER of the winter, art thou here again?
O welcome, thou that bring'st the summer nigh!
The bitter wind makes not thy victory vain,
Nor will we mock thee for thy faint blue sky.
Welcome, O March! whose kindly days and dry
Make April ready for the throstle's song,
Thou first redresser of the winter's wrong!

Yea, welcome March! and though I die ere June,
Yet for the hope of life I give thee praise,
Striving to swell the burden of the tune
That even now I hear thy brown birds raise,
Unmindful of the past or coming days;
Who sing: "O joy! a new year is begun:
What happiness to look upon the sun!"

Ah, what begetteth all this storm of bliss
But Death himself, who crying solemnly,
E'en from the heart of sweet Forgetfulness,
Bids us "Rejoice, lest pleasureless ye die.
Within a little time must ye go by.
Stretch forth your open hands, and while ye live
Take all the gifts that Death and Life may give."

BEHOLD once more within a quiet land
The remnant of that once aspiring band,
With all hopes fallen away, but such as light
The sons of men to that unfailing night,
That death they needs must look on face to face.
Time passed, and ever fell the days apace
From off the new-strung chaplet of their life;
Yet though the time with no bright deeds was rife,
Though no fulfilled desire now made them glad,
They were not quite unhappy, rest they had,
And with their hope their fear had passed away;
New things and strange they saw from day to day;
Honoured they were, and had no lack of things
For which men crouch before the feet of kings,
And, stripped of honour, yet may fail to have.
Therefore their latter journey to the grave
Was like those days of later autumn-tide,
When he who in some town may chance to bide
Opens the window for the balmy air,
And seeing the golden hazy sky so fair,
And from some city garden hearing still
The wheeling rooks the air with music fill,
Sweet hopeful music, thinketh, Is this spring,
Surely the year can scarce be perishing?
But then he leaves the clamour of the town,
And sees the withered scanty leaves fall down,
The half-ploughed field, the flowerless garden-plot,
The dark full stream by summer long forgot,
The tangled hedges where, relaxed and dead,
The twining plants their withered berries shed,
And feels therewith the treachery of the sun,
And knows the pleasant time is well-nigh done.
In such St. Luke's short summer lived these men,
Nearing the goal of threescore years and ten;
The elders of the town their comrades were,
And they to them were waxen now as dear
As ancient men to ancient men can be;
Grave matters of belief and polity
They spoke of oft, but not alone of these;
For in their times of idleness and ease
They told of poets' vain imaginings,
And memories vague of half-forgotten things,
Not true nor false, but sweet to think upon.

For nigh the time when first that land they won,
When new-born March made fresh the hopeful air,
The wanderers sat within a chamber fair,
Guests of that city's rulers; when the day
Far from the sunny noon had fallen away;
The sky grew dark, and on the window-pane
They heard the beating of the sudden rain.
Then, all being satisfied with plenteous feast,
There spoke an ancient man, the land's chief priest,
Who said, "Dear guests, the year begins to-day,
And fain are we, before it pass away,

To hear some tales of that now altered world,
Wherefrom our fathers in old time were hurled
By the hard hands of fate and destiny.
Nor would ye hear perchance unwillingly
How we have dealt with stories of the land
Wherein the tombs of our forefathers stand:
Wherefore henceforth two solemn feasts shall be
In every month, at which some history
Shall crown our joyance; and this day, indeed,
I have a story ready for our need,
If ye will hear it; though perchance it is
That many things therein are writ amiss,
This part forgotten, that part grown too great;
For these things, too, are in the hands of fate."

They cried aloud for joy to hear him speak,
And as again the sinking sun did break
Through the dark clouds and blazed adown the hall,
His clear thin voice upon their ears did fall,
Telling a tale of times long passed away,
When men might cross a kingdom in a day,
And kings remembered they should one day die,
And all folk dwelt in great simplicity.

ATALANTA'S RACE.

ARGUMENT.

Atalanta, daughter of King Schœneus, not willing to lose her virgin's estate, made it a law to all suitors that they should run a race with her in the public place, and if they failed to overcome her should die unrevenged; and thus many brave men perished. At last came Milanion, the son of Amphidamas, who, outrunning her with the help of Venus, gained the virgin and wedded her.

THROUGH thick Arcadian woods a hunter went,
Following the beasts up, on a fresh spring day;
But since his horn-tipped bow but seldom bent,
Now at the noontide nought had happed to slay,
Within a vale he called his hounds away,
Hearkening the echoes of his lone voice cling
About the cliffs and through the beech-trees ring.

But when they ended, still awhile he stood,
And but the sweet familiar thrush could hear,
And all the day-long noises of the wood,
And o'er the dry leaves of the vanished year
His hounds' feet pattering as they drew anear,
And heavy breathing from their heads low hung,
To see the mighty cornel bow unstrung.

Then smiling did he turn to leave the place,
But with his first step some new fleeting thought
A shadow cast across his sun-burnt face;
I think the golden net that April brought
From some warm world his wavering soul had caught;
For, sunk in vague sweet longing, did he go
Betwixt the trees with doubtful steps and slow.

Yet howsoever slow he went, at last
The trees grew sparser, and the wood was done;
Whereon one farewell backward look he cast,
Then, turning round to see what place was won,
With shaded eyes looked underneath the sun,
And o'er green meads and new-turned furrows brown
Beheld the gleaming of King Schœneus' town.

So thitherward he turned, and on each side
The folk were busy on the teeming land,
And man and maid from the brown furrows cried,
Or midst the newly-blossomed vines did stand,
And as the rustic weapon pressed the hand
Thought of the nodding of the well-filled ear,
Or how the knife the heavy bunch should shear.

Merry it was: about him sung the birds,
The spring flowers bloomed along the firm dry road,
The sleek-skinned mothers of the sharp-horned herds
Now for the barefoot milking-maidens lowed;
While from the freshness of his blue abode,
Glad his death-bearing arrows to forget,
The broad sun blazed, nor scattered plagues as yet.

Through such fair things unto the gates he came,
And found them open, as though peace were there;
Wherethrough, unquestioned of his race or name,
He entered, and along the streets 'gan fare,
Which at the first of folk were well-nigh bare;
But pressing on, and going more hastily,
Men hurrying too he 'gan at last to see.

Following the last of these, he still pressed on,
Until an open space he came unto,
Where wreaths of fame had oft been lost and won,
For feats of strength folk there were wont to do.
And now our hunter looked for something new,
Because the whole wide space was bare, and stilled
The high seats were, with eager people filled.

There with the others to a seat he gat,
Whence he beheld a broidered canopy,
'Neath which in fair array King Schœneus sat
Upon his throne with councillors thereby;
And underneath his well-wrought seat and high,

He saw a golden image of the sun,
A silver image of the Fleet-foot One.

A brazen altar stood beneath their feet
Whereon a thin flame flickered in the wind,
Nigh this a herald clad in raiment meet
Made ready even now his horn to wind,
By whom a huge man held a sword, entwined
With yellow flowers; these stood a little space
From off the altar, nigh the starting-place.

And there two runners did the sign abide
Foot set to foot,—a young man slim and fair,
Crisp-haired, well knit, with firm limbs often tried
In places where no man his strength may spare;
Dainty his thin coat was, and on his hair
A golden circlet of renown he wore,
And in his hand an olive garland bore.

But on this day with whom shall he contend?
A maid stood by him like Diana clad
When in the woods she lists her bow to bend,
Too fair for one to look on and be glad,
Who scarcely yet has thirty summers had,
If he must still behold her from afar;
Too fair to let the world live free from war.

She seemed all earthly matters to forget;
Of all tormenting lines her face was clear,
Her wide grey eyes upon the goal were set
Calm and unmoved as though no soul were near;
But her foe trembled as a man in fear,
Nor from her loveliness one moment turned
His anxious face with fierce desire that burned.

Now through the hush there broke the trumpet's clang
Just as the setting sun made eventide.
Then from light feet a spurt of dust there sprang,
And swiftly were they running side by side;
But silent did the thronging folk abide
Until the turning-post was reached at last,
And round about it still abreast they passed.

But when the people saw how close they ran,
When half-way to the starting-point they were,
A cry of joy broke forth, whereat the man
Headed the white-foot runner, and drew near
Unto the very end of all his fear;
And scarce his straining feet the ground could feel,
And bliss unhoped for o'er his heart 'gan steal.

But midst the loud victorious shouts he heard
Her footsteps drawing nearer, and the sound
Of fluttering raiment, and thereat afeard
His flushed and eager face he turned around,
And even then he felt her past him bound
Fleet as the wind, but scarcely saw her there
Till on the goal she laid her fingers fair.

There stood she breathing like a little child
Amid some warlike clamour laid asleep,
For no victorious joy her red lips smiled,
Her cheek its wonted freshness did but keep;
No glance lit up her clear grey eyes and deep,
Though some divine thought softened all her face
As once more rang the trumpet through the place.

But her late foe stopped short amidst his course,
One moment gazed upon her piteously,
Then with a groan his lingering feet did force
To leave the spot whence he her eyes could see;
And, changed like one who knows his time must be
But short and bitter, without any word
He knelt before the bearer of the sword;

Then high rose up the gleaming deadly blade,
Bared of its flowers, and through the crowded place
Was silence now, and midst of it the maid
Went by the poor wretch at a gentle pace,
And he to hers upturned his sad white face;
Nor did his eyes behold another sight
Ere on his soul there fell eternal night.

So was the pageant ended, and all folk
Talking of this and that familiar thing
In little groups from that sad concourse broke,
For now the shrill bats were upon the wing,
And soon dark night would slay the evening,
And in dark gardens sang the nightingale
Her little-heeded, oft-repeated tale.

And with the last of all the hunter went,
Who, wondering at the strange sight he had seen,
Prayed an old man to tell him what it meant,
Both why the vanquished man so slain had been,
And if the maiden were an earthly queen,
Or rather what much more she seemed to be,
No sharer in the world's mortality.

"Stranger," said he, "I pray she soon may die
Whose lovely youth has slain so many an one!
King Schœneus' daughter is she verily,
Who when her eyes first looked upon the sun
Was fain to end her life but new begun,
For he had vowed to leave but men alone
Sprung from his loins when he from earth was gone.

"Therefore he bade one leave her in the wood,
And let wild things deal with her as they might,

But this being done, some cruel god thought good
To save her beauty in the world's despite:
Folk say that her, so delicate and white
As now she is, a rough root-grubbing bear
Amidst her shapeless cubs at first did rear.

"In course of time the woodfolk slew her nurse,
And to their rude abode the youngling brought,
And reared her up to be a kingdom's curse;
Who grown a woman, of no kingdom thought,
But armed and swift, 'mid beasts destruction wrought,
Nor spared two shaggy centaur kings to slay
To whom her body seemed an easy prey.

"So to this city, led by fate, she came
Whom known by signs, whereof I cannot tell,
King Schœneus for his child at last did claim,
Nor otherwhere since that day doth she dwell
Sending too many a noble soul to hell—
What! thine eyes glisten! what then, thinkest thou
Her shining head unto the yoke to bow?

"Listen, my son, and love some other maid
For she the saffron gown will never wear,
And on no flower-strewn couch shall she be laid,
Nor shall her voice make glad a lover's ear:
Yet if of Death thou hast not any fear,
Yea, rather, if thou lov'st him utterly,
Thou still may'st woo her ere thou com'st to die,

"Like him that on this day thou sawest lie dead;
For, fearing as I deem the sea-born one,
The maid has vowed e'en such a man to wed
As in the course her swift feet can outrun,
But whoso fails herein, his days are done:
He came the nighest that was slain to-day,
Although with him I deem she did but play.

"Behold, such mercy Atalanta gives
To those that long to win her loveliness;
Be wise! be sure that many a maid there lives
Gentler than she, of beauty little less,
Whose swimming eyes thy loving words shall bless,
When in some garden, knee set close to knee,
Thou sing'st the song that love may teach to thee."

So to the hunter spake that ancient man,
And left him for his own home presently:
But he turned round, and through the moonlight wan
Reached the thick wood, and there 'twixt tree and tree
Distraught he passed the long night feverishly,
'Twixt sleep and waking, and at dawn arose
To wage hot war against his speechless foes.

There to the hart's flank seemed his shaft to grow,
As panting down the broad green glades he flew,
There by his horn the Dryads well might know
His thrust against the bear's heart had been true,
And there Adonis' bane his javelin slew,
But still in vain through rough and smooth he went,
For none the more his restlessness was spent.

So wandering, he to Argive cities came,
And in the lists with valiant men he stood,
And by great deeds he won him praise and fame,
And heaps of wealth for little-valued blood;
But none of all these things, or life, seemed good
Unto his heart, where still unsatisfied
A ravenous longing warred with fear and pride.

Therefore it happed when but a month had gone
Since he had left King Schœneus' city old,
In hunting-gear again, again alone
The forest-bordered meads did he behold,
Where still mid thoughts of August's quivering gold
Folk hoed the wheat, and clipped the vine in trust
Of faint October's purple-foaming must.

And once again he passed the peaceful gate,
While to his beating heart his lips did lie,
That owning not victorious love and fate,
Said, half aloud, "And here too must I try,
To win of alien men the mastery,
And gather for my head fresh meed of fame
And cast new glory on my father's name."

In spite of that, how beat his heart, when first
Folk said to him, "And art thou come to see
That which still makes our city's name accurst
Among all mothers for its cruelty?
Then know indeed that fate is good to thee
Because to-morrow a new luckless one
Against the whitefoot maid is pledged to run."

So on the morrow with no curious eyes
As once he did, that piteous sight he saw,
Nor did that wonder in his heart arise
As toward the goal the conquering maid 'gan draw,
Nor did he gaze upon her eyes with awe,
Too full the pain of longing filled his heart
For fear or wonder there to have a part.

But O, how long the night was ere it went!
How long it was before the dawn begun
Showed to the wakening birds the sun's intent
That not in darkness should the world be done!
And then, and then, how long before the sun

Bade silently the toilers of the earth
Get forth to fruitless cares or empty mirth!

And long it seemed that in the market-place
He stood and saw the chaffering folk go by,
Ere from the ivory throne King Schœneus' face
Looked down upon the murmur royally,
But then came trembling that the time was nigh
When he midst pitying looks his love must claim,
And jeering voices must salute his name.

But as the throng he pierced to gain the throne,
His alien face distraught and anxious told
What hopeless errand he was bound upon,
And, each to each, folk whispered to behold
His godlike limbs; nay, and one woman old
As he went by must pluck him by the sleeve
And pray him yet that wretched love to leave.

For sidling up she said, "Canst thou live twice,
Fair son? canst thou have joyful youth again,
That thus thou goest to the sacrifice
Thyself the victim? nay then, all in vain
Thy mother bore her longing and her pain,
And one more maiden on the earth must dwell
Hopeless of joy, nor fearing death and hell.

"O, fool, thou knowest not the compact then
That with the threeformed goddess she has made
To keep her from the loving lips of men,
And in no saffron gown to be arrayed,
And therewithal with glory to be paid,
And love of her the moonlit river sees
White 'gainst the shadow of the formless trees.

"Come back, and I myself will pray for thee
Unto the sea-born framer of delights,
To give thee her who on the earth may be
The fairest stirrer up to death and fights,
To quench with hopeful days and joyous nights
The flame that doth thy youthful heart consume:
Come back, nor give thy beauty to the tomb."

How should he listen to her earnest speech?
Words, such as he not once or twice had said
Unto himself, whose meaning scarce could reach
The firm abode of that sad hardihead—
He turned about, and through the marketstead
Swiftly he passed, until before the throne
In the cleared space he stood at last alone.

Then said the King, "Stranger, what dost thou here?
Have any of my folk done ill to thee?
Or art thou of the forest men in fear?
Or art thou of the sad fraternity
Who still will strive my daughter's mates to be,
Staking their lives to win to earthly bliss
The lonely maid, the friend of Artemis?"

"O King," he said, "thou sayest the word indeed;
Nor will I quit the strife till I have won
My sweet delight, or death to end my need.
And know that I am called Milanion,
Of King Amphidamas the well-loved son:
So fear not that to thy old name, O King,
Much loss or shame my victory will bring."

"Nay, Prince," said Schœneus, "welcome to this land
Thou wert indeed, if thou wert here to try
Thy strength 'gainst some one mighty of his hand;
Nor would we grudge thee well-won mastery.
But now, why wilt thou come to me to die,
And at my door lay down thy luckless head,
Swelling the band of the unhappy dead,

"Whose curses even now my heart doth fear?
Lo, I am old, and know what life can be,
And what a bitter thing is death anear.
O Son! be wise, and hearken unto me,
And if no other can be dear to thee,
At least as now, yet is the world full wide,
And bliss in seeming hopeless hearts may hide:

"But if thou losest life, then all is lost."
"Nay, King," Milanion said, "thy words are vain.
Doubt not that I have counted well the cost.
But say, on what day wilt thou that I gain
Fulfilled delight, or death to end my pain?
Right glad were I if it could be to-day,
And all my doubts at rest for ever lay."

"Nay," said King Schœneus, "thus it shall not be,
But rather shalt thou let a month go by,
And weary with thy prayers for victory
What god thou know'st the kindest and most nigh.
So doing, still perchance thou shalt not die:
And with my goodwill wouldst thou have the maid,
For of the equal gods I grow afraid.

"And until then, O Prince, be thou my guest,
And all these troublous things awhile forget."
"Nay," said he, "couldst thou give my soul good rest,
And on mine head a sleepy garland set,
Then had I 'scaped the meshes of the net,
Nor shouldst thou hear from me another word;
But now, make sharp thy fearful heading-sword.

"Yet will I do what son of man may do,
And promise all the gods may most desire,

That to myself I may at least be true;
And on that day my heart and limbs so tire,
With utmost strain and measureless desire,
That, at the worst, I may but fall asleep
When in the sunlight round that sword shall sweep."

He went therewith, nor anywhere would bide,
But unto Argos restlessly did wend;
And there, as one who lays all hope aside,
Because the leech has said his life must end,
Silent farewell he bade to foe and friend,
And took his way unto the restless sea,
For there he deemed his rest and help might be.

UPON the shore of Argolis there stands
A temple to the goddess that he sought,
That, turned unto the lion-bearing lands,
Fenced from the east, of cold winds hath no thought,
Though to no homestead there the sheaves are brought,
No groaning press torments the close-clipped murk,
Lonely the fane stands, far from all men's work.

Pass through a close, set thick with myrtle-trees,
Through the brass doors that guard the holy place,
And entering, hear the washing of the seas
That twice a-day rise high above the base,
And with the south-west urging them, embrace
The marble feet of her that standeth there
That shrink not, naked though they be and fair.

Small is the fane through which the seawind sings
About Queen Venus' well-wrought image white,
But hung around are many precious things,
The gifts of those who, longing for delight,
Have hung them there within the goddess' sight,
And in return have taken at her hands
The living treasures of the Grecian lands.

And thither now has come Milanion,
And showed unto the priests' wide open eyes
Gifts fairer than all those that there have shone,
Silk cloths, inwrought with Indian fantasies,
And bowls inscribed with sayings of the wise
Above the deeds of foolish living things;
And mirrors fit to be the gifts of kings.

And now before the Sea-born One he stands,
By the sweet veiling smoke made dim and soft,
And while the incense trickles from his hands,
And while the odorous smoke-wreaths hang aloft,
Thus doth he pray to her: "O Thou, who oft
Hast holpen man and maid in their distress
Despise me not for this my wretchedness!

"O goddess, among us who dwell below,
Kings and great men, great for a little while,
Have pity on the lowly heads that bow,
Nor hate the hearts that love them without guile;
Wilt thou be worse than these, and is thy smile
A vain device of him who set thee here,
An empty dream of some artificer?

"O, great one, some men love, and are ashamed;
Some men are weary of the bonds of love;
Yea, and by some men lightly art thou blamed,
That from thy toils their lives they cannot move,
And 'mid the ranks of men their manhood prove.
Alas! O goddess, if thou slayest me
What new immortal can I serve but thee?

"Think then, will it bring honour to thy head
If folk say, 'Everything aside he cast
And to all fame and honour was he dead,
And to his one hope now is dead at last,
Since all unholpen he is gone and past:
Ah, the gods love not man, for certainly,
He to his helper did not cease to cry.'

"Nay, but thou wilt help; they who died before
Not single-hearted as I deem came here,
Therefore unthanked they laid their gifts before
Thy stainless feet, still shivering with their fear,
Lest in their eyes their true thought might appear,
Who sought to be the lords of that fair town,
Dreaded of men and winners of renown.

"O Queen, thou knowest I pray not for this:
O set us down together in some place
Where not a voice can break our heaven of bliss,
Where nought but rocks and I can see her face,
Softening beneath the marvel of thy grace,
Where not a foot our vanished steps can track—
The golden age, the golden age come back!

"O fairest, hear me now who do thy will,
Plead for thy rebel that she be not slain,
But live and love and be thy servant still;
Ah, give her joy and take away my pain,
And thus two long-enduring servants gain.
An easy thing this is to do for me,
What need of my vain words to weary thee

"But none the less, this place will I not leave
Until I needs must go my death to meet,
Or at thy hands some happy sign receive
That in great joy we twain may one day greet
Thy presence here and kiss thy silver feet,

Such as we deem thee, fair beyond all words,
Victorious o'er our servants and our lords."

Then from the altar back a space he drew,
But from the Queen turned not his face away,
But 'gainst a pillar leaned, until the blue
That arched the sky, at ending of the day,
Was turned to ruddy gold and changing grey,
And clear, but low, the nigh-ebbed windless sea
In the still evening murmured ceaselessly.

And there he stood when all the sun was down,
Nor had he moved, when the dim golden light,
Like the far lustre of a godlike town,
Had left the world to seeming hopeless night,
Nor would he move the more when wan moonlight
Streamed through the pillars for a little while,
And lighted up the white Queen's changeless smile.

Nought noted he the shallow-flowing sea
As step by step it set the wrack a-swim;
The yellow torchlight nothing noted he
Wherein with fluttering gown and half-bared limb
The temple damsels sung their midnight hymn;
And nought the doubled stillness of the fane
When they were gone and all was hushed again.

But when the waves had touched the marble base,
And steps the fish swim over twice a-day,
The dawn beheld him sunken in his place
Upon the floor; and sleeping there he lay,
Not heeding aught the little jets of spray
The roughened sea brought nigh, across him cast,
For as one dead all thought from him had passed.

Yet long before the sun had showed his head,
Long ere the varied hangings on the wall
Had gained once more their blue and green and red,
He rose as one some well-known sign doth call
When war upon the city's gates doth fall,
And scarce like one fresh risen out of sleep,
He 'gan again his broken watch to keep.

Then he turned round; not for the sea-gull's cry
That wheeled above the temple in his flight,
Not for the fresh south wind that lovingly
Breathed on the new-born day and dying night,
But some strange hope 'twixt fear and great delight
Drew round his face, now flushed, now pale and wan,
And still constrained his eyes the sea to scan.

Now a faint light lit up the southern sky,
Not sun or moon, for all the world was grey,
But this a bright cloud seemed, that drew anigh,
Lighting the dull waves that beneath it lay
As toward the temple still it took its way,
And still grew greater, till Milanion
Saw nought for dazzling light that round him shone.

But as he staggered with his arms outspread,
Delicious unnamed odours breathed around,
For languid happiness he bowed his head,
And with wet eyes sank down upon the ground,
Nor wished for aught, nor any dream he found
To give him reason for that happiness,
Or make him ask more knowledge of his bliss.

At last his eyes were cleared, and he could see
Through happy tears the goddess face to face
With that faint image of Divinity,
Whose well-wrought smile and dainty changeless grace
Until that morn so gladdened all the place;
Then he, unwitting cried aloud her name
And covered up his eyes for fear and shame.

But through the stillness he her voice could hear
Piercing his heart with joy scarce bearable,
That said, "Milanion, wherefore dost thou fear,
I am not hard to those who love me well;
List to what I a second time will tell,
And thou mayest hear perchance, and live to save
The cruel maiden from a loveless grave.

"See, by my feet three golden apples lie—
Such fruit among the heavy roses falls,
Such fruit my watchful damsels carefully
Store up within the best loved of my walls,
Ancient Damascus, where the lover calls
Above my unseen head, and faint and light
The rose-leaves flutter round me in the night.

"And note, that these are not alone most fair
With heavenly gold, but longing strange they bring
Unto the hearts of men, who will not care
Beholding these, for any once-loved thing
Till round the shining sides their fingers cling.
And thou shalt see thy well-girt swiftfoot maid
By sight of these amidst her glory stayed.

"For bearing these within a scrip with thee,
When first she heads thee from the starting-place
Cast down the first one for her eyes to see,
And when she turns aside make on apace,
And if again she heads thee in the race
Spare not the other two to cast aside
If she not long enough behind will bide.

"Farewell, and when has come the happy time
That she Diana's raiment must unbind
And all the world seems blessed with Saturn's clime,
And thou with eager arms about her twined
Beholdest first her grey eyes growing kind,

Surely, O trembler, thou shalt scarcely then
Forget the Helper of unhappy men."

Milanion raised his head at this last word
For now so soft and kind she seemed to be
No longer of her Godhead was he feared;
Too late he looked; for nothing could he see
But the white image glimmering doubtfully
In the departing twilight cold and grey,
And those three apples on the steps that lay.

These then he caught up quivering with delight,
Yet fearful lest it all might be a dream;
And though aweary with the watchful night,
And sleepless nights of longing, still did deem
He could not sleep; but yet the first sunbeam
That smote the fane across the heaving deep
Shone on him laid in calm untroubled sleep.

But little ere the noontide did he rise,
And why he felt so happy scarce could tell
Until the gleaming apples met his eyes.
Then leaving the fair place where this befell
Oft he looked back as one who loved it well,
Then homeward to the haunts of men 'gan
wend
To bring all things unto a happy end.

Now has the lingering month at last gone by,
Again are all folk round the running place,
Nor other seems the dismal pageantry
Than heretofore, but that another face
Looks o'er the smooth course ready for the race,
For now, beheld of all, Milanion
Stands on the spot he twice has looked upon.

But yet—what change is this that holds the
maid?
Does she indeed see in his glittering eye
More than disdain of the sharp shearing blade,
Some happy hope of help and victory?
The others seemed to say, "We come to die,
Look down upon us for a little while,
That dead, we may bethink us of thy smile."

But he—what look of mastery was this
He cast on her? why were his lips so red?
Why was his face so flushed with happiness?
So looks not one who deems himself but dead,
E'en if to death he bows a willing head;
So rather looks a god well pleased to find
Some earthly damsel fashioned to his mind.

Why must she drop her lids before his gaze,
And even as she casts adown her eyes
Redden to note his eager glance of praise,
And wish that she were clad in other guise?
Why must the memory to her heart arise
Of things unnoticed when they first were heard,
Some lover's song, some answering maiden's word?

What makes these longings, vague, without a
name,
And this vain pity never felt before,
This sudden languor, this contempt of fame,
This tender sorrow for the time past o'er,
These doubts that grow each minute more and
more?
Why does she tremble as the time grows near,
And weak defeat and woeful victory fear?

Now while she seemed to hear her beating heart,
Above their heads the trumpet blast rang out
And forth they sprang; and she must play her part.
Then flew her white feet, knowing not a doubt,
Though slackening once, she turned her head
about,
But then she cried aloud and faster fled
Than e'er before, and all men deemed him dead.

But with no sound he raised aloft his hand,
And thence what seemed a ray of light there flew
And past the maid rolled on along the sand;
Then trembling she her feet together drew
And in her heart a strong desire there grew
To have the toy; some god she thought had given
That gift to her, to make of earth a heaven.

Then from the course with eager steps she ran,
And in her odorous bosom laid the gold.
But when she turned again, the great-limbed man,
Now well ahead she failed not to behold,
And mindful of her glory waxing cold,
Sprang up and followed him in hot pursuit,
Though with one hand she touched the golden fruit.

Note too, the bow that she was wont to bear
She laid aside to grasp the glittering prize,
And o'er her shoulder from the quiver fair
Three arrows fell and lay before her eyes
Unnoticed, as amidst the people's cries
She sprang to head the strong Milanion,
Who now the turning-post had well-nigh won.

But as he set his mighty hand on it
White fingers underneath his own were laid,
And white limbs from his dazzled eyes did flit,
Then he the second fruit cast by the maid:
She ran awhile, and then as one afraid
Wavered and stopped, and turned and made no
stay,
Until the globe with its bright fellow lay.

Then, as a troubled glance she cast around
Now far a head the Argive could she see,
And in her garment's hem one hand she wound
To keep the double prize, and strenuously
Sped o'er the course, and little doubt had she
To win the day, though now but scanty space
Was left betwixt him and the winning place.

Short was the way unto such winged feet,
Quickly she gained upon him till at last
He turned about her eager eyes to meet
And from his hand the third fair apple cast.
She wavered not, but turned and ran so fast
After the prize that should her bliss fulfil,
That in her hand it lay ere it was still.

Nor did she rest, but turned about to win
Once more, an unblest woeful victory—
And yet—and yet—why does her breath begin
To fail her, and her feet drag heavily?
Why fails she now to see if far or nigh
The goal is? why do her grey eyes grow dim?
Why do these tremors run through every limb?

She spreads her arms abroad some stay to find
Else must she fall, indeed, and findeth this,
A strong man's arms about her body twined.
Nor may she shudder now to feel his kiss,
So wrapped she is in new unbroken bliss:
Made happy that the foe the prize hath won,
She weeps glad tears for all her glory done.

SHATTER the trumpet, hew adown the posts!
Upon the brazen altar break the sword,
And scatter incense to appease the ghosts
Of those who died here by their own award.
Bring forth the image of the mighty Lord,
And her who unseen o'er the runners hung,
And did a deed for ever to be sung.

Here are the gathered folk; make no delay,
Open King Schœneus' well-filled treasury,
Bring out the gifts long hid from light of day,
The golden bowls o'erwrought with imagery,
Gold chains, and unguents brought from over sea,
The saffron gown the old Phœnician brought,
Within the temple of the Goddess wrought.

O ye, O damsels, who shall never see
Her, that Love's servant bringeth now to you,
Returning from another victory,
In some cool bower do all that now is due!
Since she in token of her service new
Shall give to Venus offerings rich enow,
Her maiden zone, her arrows, and her bow.

So when his last word's echo died away,
The growing wind at end of that wild day
Alone they heard, for silence bound them all;
Yea, on their hearts a weight had seemed to fall,
As unto the scarce-hoped felicity
The tale grew round—the end of life so nigh,
The aim so little, and the joy so vain—
For as a child's unmeasured joy brings pain
Unto a grown man holding grief at bay,
So the old fervent story of that day
Brought pain half-sweet, to these: till now the fire
Upon the hearth sent up a flickering spire
Of ruddy flame, as fell the burned-through logs,
And, waked by sudden silence, grey old dogs,
The friends of this or that man, rose and fawned
On hands they knew; withal once more there dawned
The light of common day on those old hearts,
And all were ready now to play their parts,
And take what feeble joy might yet remain
In place of all they once had hoped to gain.

NOW on the second day that these did meet
March was a-dying through soft days and sweet,
Too hopeful for the wild days yet to be;
But in the hall that ancient company,
Not lacking younger folk that day at least,
Softened by spring were gathered at the feast,
And as the time drew on, throughout the hall
A horn was sounded, giving note to all
That they at last the looked-for tale should hear.

Then spake a wanderer, "O kind hosts and dear,
Hearken a little unto such a tale
As folk with us will tell in every vale
About the yule-tide fire, whenas the snow
Deep in the passes, letteth men to go
From place to place: now there few great folk be,
Although we upland men have memory
Of ills kings did us; yet as now indeed
Few have much wealth, few are in utter need.
Like the wise ants a kingless, happy folk
We long have been, not galled by any yoke,
But the white leaguer of the winter tide
Whereby all men at home are bound to bide.
—Alas, my folly! how I talk of it,
As though from this place where to-day we sit
The way thereto were short—Ah, would to God
Upon the snow-freed herbage now I trod!
But pardon, sirs; the time goes swiftly by,
Hearken a tale of conquering destiny."

THE MAN BORN TO BE KING.

ARGUMENT.

It was foretold to a great king, that he who should reign after him should be low-born and poor; which thing came to pass in the end, for all that the king could do.

A KING there was in days of old
Who ruled wide lands, nor lacked for gold,
Nor honour, nor much longed-for praise,
And his days were called happy days,
So peaceable his kingdoms were,
While others, wrapt in war and fear,
Fell ever unto worse and worse.
Therefore his city was the nurse
Of all that men then had of lore,
And none were driven from his door
That seemed well skilled in anything;
So of the sages was he king;
And from this learned man and that,
Little by little, lore he gat,
And many a lordless, troubled land
Fell scarce loth to his dreaded hand.
Midst this it chanced that, on a day,
Clad in his glittering gold array,
He held a royal festival;
And nigh him in his glorious hall
Beheld his sages most and least,
Sitting much honoured at the feast.
But mid the faces so well known,
Of men he well might call his own,
He saw a little wizened man
With face grown rather grey than wan
From lapse of years; beardless was he,
And bald as is the winter tree;
But his two deep-set, glittering eyes
Gleamed at the sight of mysteries
None knew but he; few words he said,
And unto those small heed was paid;
But the king, young, yet old in guile,
Failed not to note a flickering smile
Upon his face, as now and then
He turned him from the learned men
Toward the king's seat, so thought to know
What new thing he might have to show;
And presently, the meat being done,
He bade them bring him to his throne,
And when before the throne he stood,
He said, "We deem thy coming good;
What is thine art, canst thou in rhyme
Tell stories of the ancient time?
Or dost thou chronicle old wars?
Or know'st thou of the change of stars?
Or seek'st thou the transmuting stone?
Or canst thou make the shattered bone
Grow whole, and dying men arise
And live as long as thou the wise;
Or what gift dost thou bring me here,
Where nought but men of lore are dear
To me and mine?"
"O King," said he,
"But few things know I certainly,
Though I have toiled for many a day
Along the hard and doubtful way
That bringeth wise men to the grave:
And now for all the years I gave,
To know all things that man can learn,
A few months learned life I earn,
Nor feel much liker to a god
Than when beside my sheep I trod
Upon the thymy, wind-swept down.
Yet am I come unto thy town
To tell thee somewhat that I learned
As on the stars I gazed, and yearned
To cast this weary body off,
With all its chains of mock and scoff
And creeping death—for as I read
The sure decrees with joy and dread,
Somewhat I saw writ down of thee,
And who shall have the sovereignty
When thou art gone."
"Nay," said the King,
"Speak quick and tell me of the thing."
"Sire," said the sage, "thine ancient line
Thou holdest as a thing divine,
So long and undisturbed it is,
But now shall there be end to this,

For surely in my glittering text
I read that he who shall sit next,
On this thine ancient throne and high,
Shall be no better born than I
Whose grandsire none remembereth,
Nor where my father first drew breath."
"Yea," said the King, "and this may be;
Yet, O Sage, ere I credit thee,
Some token certes must thou show,
Or tell me what I think to know,
Alone, among all folk alive;
Then surely great gifts will I give
To thee, and make thee head of all
Who watch the planets rise and fall."
"Bid these stand backward from thy throne,"
The Sage said, "then to thee alone
Long hidden matters will I tell;
And then, if thou believest, well—
And if thou dost not—well also;
No gift I ask, but leave to go;
For strange to me is this thy state,
And for thyself, thou well may'st hate
My crabbed age and misery."
"Well," said the King, "let this thing be;
And ye, my masters, stand aback!
For of the fresh air have I lack,
And in my pleasance would I walk
To hearken this grave elder's talk
And gain new lore."
Therewith he rose
And led the way unto a close,
Shaded with grey-leaved olive-trees;
And when they were amidst of these
He turned about and said, "Speak, friend,
And of thy folly make an end,
And take this golden chain therefore."
"Rightly thou namest my weak lore,"
The Sage said, "therefore to the end
Be wise, and what the fates may send
Take thou, nor struggle in the net
Wherein thine helpless feet are set!
—Hearken! a year is well-nigh done
Since, at the hottest of the sun,
Stood Antony beneath this tree,
And took a jewelled cup of thee,
And drank swift death in guise of wine;
Since he, most trusted of all thine,
At last too full of knowledge grew,
And chiefly, he of all men knew
How the Earl Marshal Hugh had died;
Since he had drawn him on to ride
Into a bushment of his foes,
To die amidst the rain of blows."
"Thou knowest that by me he died,"
The King said, "how if now I cried,
Help! the magician slayeth me?
Swiftly should twenty sword-blades be
Clashing within thy ribs, and thou
Nearer to death than even now."
"Not thus, O King, I fear to die,"
The Sage said; "Death shall pass me by
Many a year yet, because perchance,
I fear not aught his clattering dance,
And have enough of weary days.
—But thou—farewell, and win the praise
Of sages, by thy hearkening
With heed to this most certain thing.
Fear not because this tale I know,
For to my grey tower back I go
High raised above the heathy hills,
Where the great erne the swift hare kills,
Or stoops upon the new-yeaned lamb;
There almost as a god I am
Unto few folk; who hear thy name
Indeed, but know not of thy fame,
Nay, scarce if thou be man or beast."
So saying, back unto the feast
He turned, and went adown the hall,
Not heeding any gibe or call;
And left the palace and the town
With face turned toward his windy down.
Back to the hall, too, the King went,
With eyes upon the pavement bent
In pensive thought, delighting not
In riches and his kingly lot;
But thinking how his days began,
And of the lonely souls of man.

But time past, and midst this and that,
The wise man's message he forgat;
And as a king he lived his life,
And took to him a noble wife
Of the kings' daughters, rich and fair.
And they being wed for nigh a year,
And she now growing great with child,
It happed unto the forest wild
This king with many folk must ride
At ending of the summer-tide.
There boar and hart they brought to bay,
And had right noble prize that day;
But when the noon was now long past,
And the thick woods grew overcast,
They roused the mightiest hart of all.
Then loudly 'gan the King to call
Unto his huntsmen, not to leave
That mighty beast for dusk nor eve,
Till they had won him; with which word
His horn he blew, and forth he spurred,
Taking no thought of most or least,
But only of that royal beast.
And over rough and smooth he rode,
Nor yet for anything abode,
Till dark night, swallowing up the day,
With blindness his swift course must stay.

Nor was there with him any one
So far his fair steed had outrun
The best of all his hunting-folk.
So, glancing at the stars that broke
'Twixt the thick branches here and there,
Backward he turned, and peered with care
Into the darkness, but saw nought,
Nor heard his folk, and therewith thought
His bed must be the brake leaves brown.
Then in a while he lighted down,
And felt about a little space,
If he might find a softer place;
But as he groped from tree to tree
Some glimmering light he seemed to see
'Twixt the dark stems, and thither turned,
If yet perchance some wood-fire burned
Within a peasant's hut, where he
Might find, amidst their misery,
Rough food, or shelter at the least.
So, leading on his wearied beast,
Blindly he crept from tree to tree,
Till slowly grew that light to be
The thing he looked for, and he found
A hut on a cleared space of ground,
From whose half-opened door there streamed
The light that erst far off had gleamed.
Then of that shelter was he fain,
But just as he made shift to gain
The open space in front of it,
A shadow o'er the grass did flit,
And on the wretched threshold stood
A big man, with a bar of wood
In his right hand, who seemed as though
He got him ready for a blow;
But ere he spoke the King cried, "Friend,
May God good hap upon thee send,
If thou wilt give me rest this night,
And food according to thy might."
"Nay," said the carle, "my wife lieth
In labour, and is nigh her death:
Nor canst thou enter here at all;
But near by is my asses' stall,
Who on this night bide in the town.
There, if thou wilt, mayst thou lie down,
And sleep until the dawn of day,
And I will bring thee what I may
Of food and drink."
Then said the King,
"Thanked be thou; neither for nothing
Shalt thou this good deed do to me."
"Nay," said the carle, "let these things be,
Surely I think before the morn,
To be too weary and forlorn
For gold much heart in me to put."
With that he turned, and from the hut
Brought out a lantern, and rye-bread,
And wine, and showed the King a shed,
Strewed with a litter of dry brake:
Withal he muttered, for his sake,
Unto Our Lady some rude prayer,
And turned about and left him there.
So when the rye-bread, nowise fine,
The King had munched, and with green wine
Had quenched his thirst, his horse he tied
Unto a post, and there beside
He fell asleep upon the brake.

But in an hour did he awake,
Astonied with an unnamed fear,
For words were ringing in his ear
Like the last echo of a scream,
"*Take! take!*" but of the vanished dream
No image was there left to him.
Then, trembling sore in every limb,
Did he arise, and drew his sword,
And passed forth on the forest sward,
And cautiously about he crept;
But nought at all he heard, except
Some groaning of the woodman's wife,
And forest sounds well known, but rife
With terror to the lonely soul.
Then he lay down again, to roll
His limbs within his huntsman's cloak;
And slept again; and once more woke
To tremble with that unknown fear,
And other echoing words to hear—
"*Give up! give up!*" nor anything
Showed more why these strange words should ring
About him. Then he sat upright,
Bewildered, gazing through the night,
Until his weary eyes, grown dim,
Showed not the starlit tree-trunks slim
Against the black wood, grey and plain;
And into sleep he sank again,
And woke not soon: but sleeping dreamed
That he awoke, nor other seemed
The place he woke in but that shed,
And there beside his bracken bed
He seemed to see the ancient sage
Shrivelled yet more with untold age,
Who bending down his head to him
Said, with a mocking smile and grim,—
"Take, or give up; what matters it?
This child new-born shall surely sit
Upon thy seat when thou art gone,
And dwelling 'twixt strait walls of stone."
Again the King woke at that word
And sat up, panting and afeard,
And staring out into the night,
Where yet the woods thought not of light;
And fain he was to cast off sleep,
Such visions from his eyes to keep.
Heavy his head grew none the less,
'Twixt 'wildering thoughts and weariness,

And soon he fell asleep once more,
Nor dreamed, nor woke again, before
The sun shone through the forest trees;
And, shivering in the morning breeze,
He blinked with just-awakened eyes;
And pondering on those mysteries,
Unto the woodman's hovel went.

Him he found kneeling down, and bent
In moody grief above a bed,
Whereon his wife lay, stark and dead,
Whose soul near morn had passed away;
And 'twixt the dead and living lay
A new-born man-child, fair and great.
So in the door the King did wait
To watch the man, who had no heed
Of this or that, so sore did bleed
The new-made wound within his heart.
But as the King gazed, for his part
He did but see his threatened foe,
And ever hard his heart did grow
With deadly hate and wilfulness:
And sight of that poor man's distress
Made it the harder, as of nought
But that unbroken line he thought
Of which he was the last: withal
His scornful troubled eyes did fall
Upon that nest of poverty,
Where nought of joy he seemed to see.
On straw the poor dead woman lay;
The door alone let in the day,
Showing the trodden earthen floor,
A board on trestles weak and poor,
Three stumps of tree for stool or chair,
A half-glazed pipkin, nothing fair,
A bowl of porridge by the wife,
Untouched by lips that lacked for life,
A platter and a bowl of wood;
And in the further corner stood
A bow cut from the wych-elm tree,
A holly club, and arrows three
Ill pointed, heavy, spliced with thread.

Ah! soothly, well rememberéd
Was that unblissful wretched home,
Those four bare walls, in days to come;
And often in the coming years
He called to mind the pattering tears
That, on the rent old sackcloth cast
About the body, fell full fast,
'Twixt half-meant prayers and curses wild,
And that weak wailing of the child,
His threatened dreaded enemy,
The mighty king that was to be.
But as he gazed unsoftened there,
With hate begot of scorn and care,
Loudly he heard a great horn blow,
And his own hunting-call did know;
And soon began the shouts to hear
Of his own people drawing near.
Then lifting up his horn, he blew
A long shrill point, but as he threw
His head aback, beheld his folk,
Who from the close-set thicket broke
And o'er the cleared space swiftly passed,
With shouts that he was found at last.
Then turned the carle his doleful face,
And slowly rising in his place,
Drew thwart his eyes his fingers strong,
And on that gay-dressed glittering throng
Gazed stupidly, as still he heard
The name of King; but said no word.
But his guest spoke, "Sirs, well be ye!
This luckless woodman, whom ye see,
Gave me good harbour through the night
And such poor victual as he might;
Therefore shall he have more than gold
For his reward; since dead and cold
His helpmate lies who last night died.
See now the youngling by her side;
Him will I take and rear him so
That he shall no more lie alow
In straw, or from the beech-tree dine,
But rather use white linen fine
And silver plate; and with the sword
Shall learn to serve some King or Lord.
How say'st thou, good man?"
"Sire," he said,
Weeping, but shamefaced,—"Since here dead
She lies, that erst kept house for me,
E'en as thou willest let it be;
Though I had hoped to have a son
To help me get the day's work done.
And now, indeed, forth must he go
If unto manhood he should grow,
And lonely I must wander forth,
To whom east, west, and south, and north
Are all alike: forgive it me
If little thanks I give to thee
Who scarce can thank great God in heaven
For what is left of what was given."
Small heed unto him the King gave,
But trembling in his haste to have
The body of his enemy,
Said to an old squire, "Bring to me
The babe, and give the good man this
Wherewith to gain a little bliss,
In place of all his troubles gone,
Nor need he now be long alone."
The carle's rough face, at clink of gold,
Lit up, though still did he behold
The wasted body lying there;
But stooping, a rough box, foursquare,
Made of old wood and lined with hay,
Wherein the helpless infant lay,

He raised, and gave it to the squire
Who on the floor cast down his hire,
Nor sooth dared murmur aught the while,
But turning smiled a grim hard smile
To see the carle his pieces count
Still weeping: so did all men mount
And turning round into the wood
Forgat him and his drearihood,
And soon were far off from the hut.

Then coming out, the door he shut
Behind him, and adown a glade,
Towards a rude hermitage he made
To fetch the priest unto his need,
To bury her and say her bede—
So when all things that he might do
Were done aright, heavy with woe,
He left the woodland hut behind
To take such chance as he might find
In other lands, forgetting all
That in that forest did befall.

But through the wild-wood rode the King,
Moody and thinking on the thing,
And weighted yet by hovering fear;
Till now, when they had drawn anear
The open country, and could see
The road run on from close to lea,
And lastly by a wooden bridge
A long way from that heathy ridge
Cross over a deep lowland stream—
Then in his eyes there came a gleam,
And his hand fell upon his sword,
And turning round to squire and lord
He said, "Ride, sirs, the way is clear,
Nor of my people have I fear,
Nor do my foes range over wide;
And for myself fain would I ride
Right slowly homewards through the fields
Noting what this and that one yields;
While by my squire who bears the child
Lightly my way shall be beguiled.
For some nurse now he needs must have
This tender life of his to save;
And doubtless by the stream there is
Some house where he may dwell in bliss,
Till he grow old enough to learn
How gold and glory he may earn;
And grow, perchance, to be a lord."
With downcast eyes he spoke that word;
But forth they galloped speedily,
And he drew rein and stood to see
Their green coats lessening as they went.
This man unto the other bent,
Until mid dust and haze at last
Into a wavering mass they passed;
Then 'twixt the hedgerows vanished quite
Just told of by the dust-cloud white
Rolled upwards 'twixt the elm-trunks slim.

Then turned the King about to him
Who held the child, noting again
The thing wherein he first had lain,
And on one side of it could see
A lion painted hastily
In red upon a ground of white,
As though of old it had been dight
For some lord's rough-wrought palisade;
But naked 'mid the hay was laid
The child, and had no mark or sign.
Then said the King, "My ancient line
Thou and thy sires through good and ill
Have served, and unto thee my will
Is law enough from day to day;
Ride nigh me hearkening what I say."
He shook his rein and side by side
Down through the meadows did they ride,
And opening all his heart, the King
Told to the old man everything
Both of the sage, and of his dream.
Withal drawn nigh unto the stream,
He said, "Yet this shall never be,
For surely as thou lovest me,
Adown this water shall he float
With this rough box for ark and boat,
Then if mine old line he must spill
There let God save him if He will,
While I in no case shed his blood."
"Yea," said the squire, "thy words are good,
For the whole sin shall lie on me,
Who greater things would do for thee
If need there were; yet note, I pray,
It may be he will 'scape this day
And live; and what wouldst thou do then
If thou shouldst meet him amongst men?
I counsel thee to let him go
Since sure to nought thy will shall grow."
"Yea, yea," the King said, "let all be
That may be, if I once but see
This ark whirl in the eddies swift
Or tangled in the autumn drift
And wrong side up:" But with that word
Their horse-hoofs on the plank he heard,
And swift across the bridge he rode,
And nigh the end of it abode,
Then turned to watch the old squire stop
And leaning o'er the bridge-rail drop
The luckless child; he heard withal
A muttered word and splashing fall
And from the wakened child a cry,
And saw the cradle hurrying by,
Whirled round and sinking, but as yet
Holding the child, nor overset.

Now somewhat, soothly at the sight
Did the King doubt if he outright
Had rid him of his feeble foe,
But frowning did he turn to go
Unto his home, nor knew indeed
How better he might help his need;
And as unto his house he rode
Full little care for all he showed;
But bade stark Samuel the squire
Unto his bridal-hand ride nigher,
And talked to him of careless things,
As unto such will talk great kings.
But when unto his palace gate
He came at last, thereby did wait
The chamberlain with eager eyes
Above his lips grown grave with lies,
In haste to tell him that the queen,
While in the wild-wood he had been,
Had borne a daughter unto him
Strong, fair of face, and straight of limb.
So well at ease and glad thereat
His troubled dream he nigh forgat,
His troubled waking, and the ride
Unto the fateful river-side;
Or thought of all as little things
Unmeet to trouble souls of kings.

So passed the days, so passed the years
In such-like hopes, and such-like fears,
And such-like deeds in field and hall
As unto royal men befall,
And fourteen years have passed away
Since on the huddled brake he lay
And dreamed that dream, remembered now
Once and again, when slow and slow
The minutes of some sleepless night
Crawl toward the dawning of the light.

Remembered not on this sweet morn
When to the ringing of the horn,
Jingle of bits and mingled shout,
Toward that same stream he rideth out
To see his grey-winged falcons fly.
So long he rode he drew anigh
A mill upon the river's brim,
That seemed a goodly place to him,
For o'er the oily smooth millhead
There hung the apples growing red,
And many an ancient apple-tree
Within the orchard could he see,
While the smooth mill walls white and black
Shook to the great wheel's measured clack,
And grumble of the gear within;
While o'er the roof that dulled that din
The doves sat crooning half the day,
And round the half-cut stack of hay
The sparrows fluttered twittering.
There smiling stayed the joyous king,
And since the autumn noon was hot
Thought good anigh the pleasant spot
To dine that day, and therewith sent
To tell the miller his intent:
Who held the stirrup of the King,
Bareheaded, joyful at the thing,
While from his horse he lit adown,
Then led him o'er an elm-beam brown,
New cut in February tide
That crossed the stream from side to side.
So underneath the apple-trees
The King sat careless, well at ease
And ate and drank right merrily.
To whom the miller drew anigh
Among the courtiers, bringing there
Such as he could of country fare,
Green yellowing plums from off his wall,
Wasp-bitten pears, the first to fall
From off the wavering spire-like tree,
Junkets, and cream and fresh honey.
Smiling the King regarded him,
For he was round-paunched, short of limb,
Red-faced, with long, lank flaxen hair;
But with him was a boy, right fair,
Grey-eyed, and yellow-haired, most like
Unto some Michael who doth strike
The dragon on a minster wall;
So sweet-eyed was he, and withal
So fearless of all things he seemed.
But when he saw him the King deemed
He scarce could be the miller's kin,
And laughing said, "Hast thou within
Thy dusty mill the dame who bore
This stripling in the days of yore,
For fain were I to see her now,
If she be liker him than thou?"
"Sire," said the miller, "that may be
And thou my dame shalt surely see;
But for the stripling, neither I
Begat him, nor my wife did lie
In labour when the lad was born,
But as an outcast and forlorn
We found him fourteen years to-day,
So quick the time has worn away."

Then the King, hearkening what he said,
A vanished day remembered,
And troubled grew his face thereat;
But while he thought of this and that
The man turned from him and was gone
And by him stood the lad alone;
At whom he gazed, and as their eyes
Met, a great horror 'gan arise
Within his heart, and back he shrank
And shuddering a deep draught he drank,
Scarce knowing if his royal wine
He touched, or juice of some hedge-vine.

But as his eyes he lifted up
From off his jewelled golden cup,
Once more the miller drew anigh,
By whom his wife went timidly
Bearing some burden in her hand;
So when before him she did stand
And he beheld her worn and old,
And black-haired, then that hair of gold,
Grey eyes, firm lips, and round cleft chin,
Brought stronger memory of his sin.
But the carle spake, "Dame, tell the King
How this befell, a little thing
The thoughts of such great folk to hold,
Speak out, and fear not to be bold."
"My tale," she said, "is short enow,
For this day fourteen years ago
Along this river-side I rode
From market to our poor abode,
Where dwelt we far from other men,
Since thinner was the country then
Than now it is; so as I went
And wearied o'er my panniers bent,
From out the stream a feeble cry
I heard, and therewith presently,
From off my mule's back could I see
This boy who standeth here by thee,
A naked, new-born infant, laid
In a rough ark that had been stayed
By a thick tangled bed of weed;
So pitying the youngling's need,
Dismounting, did I wade for him
Waist deep, whose ark now scarce did swim
And he, with cold, and misery,
And hunger, was at point to die.
"Withal, I bare him to the mill
And cherished him, and had good will
To bring the babe up as mine own;
Since childless were we and alone,
And no one came to father it.
So oft have I rejoiced to sit
Beside the fire and watch him play.
And now, behold him!—but some day
I look to lose him, for, indeed,
I deem he comes of royal seed,
Unmeet for us: and now, my lord,
Hast thou heard every foolish word
About my son—this boy—whose name
Is Michael soothly, since he came
To us this day nigh Michaelmas.
—See, sire, the ark wherein he was!
Which I have kept."
Therewith she drew
A cloth away; but the King knew,
Long ere she moved, what he should see,
Nor looked, but seeming carelessly
Leaned on the board and hid his eyes.
But at the last did he arise
And saw the painted lion red,
Not faded, well remembered;
Withal he thought, "And who of these
Were with me then amongst the trees
To see this box;" but presently
He thought again that none but he
And the grey squire, old Samuel,
That painting could have noted well.
Since Samuel his cloak had cast
About it, and therewith had passed
Throughout the forest on that day,
And not till all were well away
Had drawn it off before the King.
But changed and downcast at the thing
He left the lovely autumn place,
Still haunted by the new-found face
Of his old foe, and back he rode
Unto his ancient rich abode
Forcing but dismal merriment
As midst his smiling lords he went;
Who yet failed not to note his mood,
So changed: and some men of the wood
Remembered them, but said not aught,
Yea, trembled lest their hidden thought
Some bird should learn, and carry it.

The morrow come, the King did sit
Alone, to talk with Samuel.
Who yet lived, gathering wage for hell.
He from the presence in a while
Came forth, and with his ugly smile
He muttered, "Well betide me, then,
St. Peter! they are lucky men
Who serve no kings, since they indeed
May damn themselves each for his need.
And will not he outlive this day
Whom the deep water could not slay,
Ere yet his lips had tasted food?"
With that a horse, both strong and good,
He gat of the King's equerry,
And toward the mill rode speedily.

There Michael by the mill-tail lay,
Watching the swift stream snatch away
His float from midst the careless dace;
But thinking of the thin, dark face,
That yesterday all men he saw
Gaze at with seeming love and awe;
Nor had he, wondering at the lords,
Lost one word of the housewife's words;
And still he noted that the King
Beheld him as a wondrous thing,
Strange to find there: so in his heart
He thought to play some royal part
In this wild play of life, and made
Stories, wherein great words he said,
And did great deeds in desperate fight.
But midst these thoughts there came in sight

He who had carried him of yore,
From out the woodman's broken door,
Dressed like a king's man, with fine gold
Touching his hard brown hands and old,
So was his sleeve embroideréd;
A plumed hat had he on his head,
And by his side a cutting sword
Fit for the girdle of a lord;
And round his neck a knife he bore,
The hilt whereof was figured o'er
With green leaves on a golden ground,
Whose stem a silver scroll enwound;
Charged with these letters, writ in black,
Strike! for no dead man cometh back!

The boy gazed at him earnestly,
With beating heart, as he drew nigh.
And when at last he drew his rein
Beside him, thought that not in vain
His dream might be. But Samuel
Below his breath said: "Surely well
Shalt thou fulfil thy destiny;
And, spite of all, thou wilt not die
Till thou hast won the archéd crown?"

But with that word he lighted down,
And said aloud, "Lad, tell to me
Where the good miller I may see;
For from the King I come to-day,
And have a word of his to say;
I think, indeed, concerning thee;
For surely thou his lad must be."

Then Michael leapt up, nor took heed
Of how the nibbling dace might feed
Upon the loose ends of his bait;
"Fair sir," he said, "my sire doth wait
Until men bring his mare from grass,
For to the good town will he pass,
Since he has need of household gear;
Follow, my lord, the place is here."

Withal, the good steed being made fast,
Unto the other side they passed,
And by the door the miller found,
Who bowed before him to the ground,
And asked what he would have him do—
Then from his bosom Samuel drew
A scroll, and said, "Good friend, read here,
And do my bidding without fear
Of doing ill."

"Sir," said the man,
"But little lettered skill I can;
Let my dame come, for she can read
Well-written letters at good need."

"Nay, friend," he said, "suffice it thee
This seal at the scroll's end to see,
My Lord the King's; and hear my word,
That I come hither from my lord
Thy foundling lad to have away
To serve the King from this same day."

Downcast the miller looked thereat,
And twisting round his dusty hat,
Said, "Well, my lord, so must it be,
Nor is he aught akin to me,
Nor seems so: none the less would I
Have left him, when I came to die,
All things I have, with this my mill,
Wherein he hath no 'prentice skill,
Young as he is: and surely here
Might he have lived, with little fear,
A life of plenty and of bliss—
Near by, too, a fair maid there is,
I looked should be good wife to him."

Meanwhile young Michael's head 'gan swim
With thoughts of noble life and praise;
And he forgat the happy days
Wherein the happy dreams he dreamed
That now so near fulfilment seemed;
And, looking through the open mill,
Stared at the grey and windy hill
And saw it not, but some fair place
Made strange with many a changing face,
And all his life that was to be.

But Samuel, laughing scornfully,
Said, "O good soul, thou thinkest then
This is a life for well-born men,
As deems our lord this youngling is—
Tell me, good lad, where lies thy bliss?"

But Michael turned shamefaced and red,
Waked from his dream, and stammering said,
"Fair sir, my life is sweet and good,
And John, the ranger of the wood,
Saith that I draw so good a bow,
That I shall have full skill enow
Ere many months have passed me by
To join the muster, and to try
To win the bag of florins white,
That folk, on Barnaby the bright,
Shoot for within the market town.
Sir, please you to look up and down
The weedy reaches of our stream,
And note the bubbles of the bream,
And see the great chub take the fly,
And watch the long pike basking lie
Outside the shadow of the weed.
Withal there come unto our need
Woodcock and snipe when swallows go;
And now the water-hen flies low
With feet that well-nigh touch the reeds,
And plovers cry about the meads,
And the stares chatter; certes, sir,
It is a fair place all the year."

Eyeing him grimly, Samuel said,
"Thou show'st churl's breeding, by my head,
In foul despite of thy fair face!
Take heart, for to a better place

Thou goest now.—Miller, farewell,
Nor need'st thou to the neighbours tell
The noble fortunes of the lad;
For, certes, he shall not be glad
To know them in a year or twain.
Yet shall thy finding not be vain,
And thou mayst bless it; for behold
This bag wherein is store of gold;
Take it and let thy hinds go play,
And grind no corn for many a day,
For it would buy thy mill and thee."
He turned to go, but pensively
Stood Michael; for his broken dream
Doubtful and far away did seem
Amidst the squire's rough mockeries;
And tears were gathering in his eyes.
But the kind miller's rough farewell
Rang in his ears; and Samuel
Stamped with his foot and plucked his sleeve;
So therewithal he turned to leave
His old abode, the quiet place,
Trembling, with wet and tearful face.
But even as he turned there came
From out the house the simple dame
And cast rough arms about the lad,
Saying, "For that I have been glad
By means of thee this many a day,
My mourning heart this hour doth pay.
But, fair son, may'st thou live in bliss,
And die in peace; remembering this,
When thou art come to high estate,
That in our house, early and late,
The happy house that shall be sad,
Thou hadst the best of all we had,
And love unfeignéd from us twain,
Whose hearts thou madest young again,
Hearts that the quicker old shall grow
Now thou art gone."
"Good dame, enow,"
Quoth Samuel, "the day grows late,
And sure the King for meat shall wait
Until he see this new-found lord."
He strode away upon that word;
And half ashamed, and half afeard,
Yet eager as his dream he neared,
Shyly the lad went after him.
They crossed the stream, and by its brim
Both mounted the great warhorse grey,
And without word they rode away.

But as along the river's edge
They went, and brown birds in the sedge
Twittered their sweet and formless tune
In the fair autumn afternoon,
And reach by reach the well-known stream
They passed, again the hopeful dream
Of one too young to think death near,
Who scarce had learned the name of fear
Remorseful memories put to flight;
Lovely the whole world showed and bright.
Nor did the harsh voice rouse again
The thought of mockery or of pain
For other thoughts held Samuel.
So, riding silently and well,
They reached at last the dusty road
That led unto the King's abode.
But Samuel turned away his face
Therefrom, and at a steady pace
The great horse thundered o'er the bridge,
And made on toward the heathy ridge,
Wherefrom they rode that other day.
But Michael, noting well the way,
Why thus they went, fell wondering,
And said aloud, "Dwells then the King,
Fair sir, as now within the wood?"
"Young fool, where that it seems him good
He dwelleth," quoth old Samuel,
"And now it pleaseth him to dwell
With the black monks across the wood."
Withal he muttered in his hood,
"Curst be the King, and thee also,
Who thrust me out such deeds to do,
When I should bide at home to pray,
Who draw so nigh my ending day."
So saying forth his horse he spurred
And to himself said yet this word,
"Yea, yea, and of all days forlorn
God curse the day when I was born."
Therewith he groaned; yet saying thus
His case seemed hard and piteous,
When he remembered how of old
Another tale he might have told.
So as each thought his own thoughts still,
The horse began to breast the hill,
And still they went on higher ground,
Until as Michael turned him round
He saw the sunny country-side
Spread out before him far and wide,
Golden amidst its waning green,
Joyous with varied life unseen.
Meanwhile from side to side of them
The trees began their way to hem,
As still he gazed from tree to tree,
And when he turned back presently
He saw before him like a wall
Uncounted tree-trunks dim and tall.
Then with their melancholy sound
The odorous spruce-woods met around
Those wayfarers, and when he turned
Once more, far off the sunlight burned
In star-like spots, while from o'erhead,
Dim twilight through the boughs was shed.
Not there as yet had Michael been,
Nor had he left the meadows green

Dotted about with spreading trees,
And fresh with sun and rain and breeze,
For those mirk woods; and now his eyes
Gazed round about for mysteries.
Since many an old wife's tale he knew;
Huge woodcutters in raiment blue,
The remnant of a mighty race,
The ancient masters of the place,
And hammering trolls he looked to see,
And dancers of the faërie,
Who, as the ancient stories told,
In front were lovely to behold,
But empty shells seen from behind.

So on they rode until the wind
Had died out, stifled by the trees,
And Michael 'mid those images
Of strange things made alive by fear,
Grew drowsy in the forest drear;
Nor noted how the time went past
Until they nigh had reached at last
The borders of the spruce-tree wood;
And with a tingling of the blood
Samuel bethought him of the day
When turned about the other way
He carried him he rode with now.
For the firs ended on the brow
Of a rough gravelly hill, and there
Lay a small valley nowise fair
Beneath them, clear at first of all
But brake, till amid rushes tall
Down in the bottom alders grew
Crabbed and rough; and winding through
The clayey mounds a brook there was
Oozy and foul, half choked with grass.
  There now the squire awhile drew rein,
And noted how the ground again
Rose up upon the other side,
And saw a green glade opening wide
'Twixt oaks and hollies, and he knew
Full well what place it led unto;
Withal he heard the bittern's boom,
And though without the fir-wood's gloom
They now were come, yet red and low
The sun above the trees did show,
And in despite of hardihead,
The old squire had a mortal dread
Of lying in the wood alone
When that was done that should be done.
  Now Michael, wakened by the wind,
Clutched tighter at the belt behind,
And with wide eyes was staring round,
When Samuel said, "Get to the ground,
My horse shall e'en sink deep enow,
Without thy body, in this slough;
And haste thee, or we both shall lie
Beneath the trees, and be as dry
As autumn dew can make us. Haste!
The time is short for thee to waste."
  Then from the horse the boy did glide,
And slowly down the valley side
They went, and Michael, wakened now,
Sang such rude songs as he might know,
Grown fresh and joyous of his life;
While Samuel, clutching at the knife
About his neck that hung, again
Down in the bottom tightened rein,
And turning, in a hoarse voice spake:
"My girths are loosening, come and take
The straps, and draw them tighter, lad."
  Then Michael stayed his carol glad,
And noting little in his mirth
The other's voice, unto the girth
Without a word straight set his hand:
But as with bent head he did stand,
Straining to tighten what was tight,
In Samuel's hand the steel flashed bright,
And fell, deep smitten in his side,
Then, leaping back, the poor lad cried,
As if for help, and staggering fell,
With wide eyes fixed on Samuel;
Who none the less grown deadly pale,
Lit down, lest that should not avail
To slay him, and beside him knelt,
And since his eyes were closed now, felt
His heart that beat yet: therewithal
His hand upon the knife did fall.
But, ere his fingers clutched it well,
Far off he seemed to hear a bell,
And trembling knelt upright again,
And listening, listened not in vain,
For clear he heard a tinkling sound.
Then to his horse from off the ground
He leapt, nor reasoned with his dread,
But thought the angel of the dead
Was drawing nigh the slayer to slay,
Ere scarce the soul had passed away.
One dreadful moment yet he heard
That bell, then like a madman spurred
His noble horse; that maddened too,
The close-set fir-wood galloped through,
Not stayed by any stock or stone,
Until the furious race being done,
Anigh the bridge he fell down dead;
And Samuel, mazed with guilt and dread,
Wandered afoot throughout the night,
But came, at dawning of the light,
Half-dead unto the palace gate.
  There till the opening did he wait;
Then, by the King's own signet-ring,
He gained the chamber of the King,
And painfully what he had done
He told, and how the thing had gone.
And said withal: "Yet is he dead,

And surely that which made my dread
Shall give thee joy: for doubt not aught
That bell the angels to him brought,
That he in Abraham's breast might lie—
So ends, O King, the prophecy."
Nathless the King scowled, ill content,
And said, "I deemed that I had sent
A man of war to do my will,
Who lacked for neither force nor skill,
And thou com'st with a woman's face,
Bewildered with thy desperate race,
And made an idiot with thy fear,
Nor bring'st me any token here!"
Therewith he rose and gat away,
But brooding on it through that day,
Thought that all things went not so ill
As first he deemed, and that he still
Might leave his old line flourishing.
Therewith both gold and many a thing
Unto old Samuel he gave,
But failed thereby his life to save;
Who, not so old in years as sin,
Died ere the winter, and within
The minster choir was laid asleep,
With carven saints his head to keep.

And so the days and years went by,
And still in great felicity
The King dwelt, wanting only this—
A son wherewith to share his bliss,
And reign when he was dead and gone.
Nor had he daughter, save that one
Born on the night when Michael first,
Forlorn, alone, and doubly cursed,
Felt on him this world's bitter air.
This daughter, midst fair maids most fair,
Was not yet wed, though at this time,
Being come unto her maiden's prime,
She looked upon her eighteenth May.
Midst this her mother passed away,
Not much lamented of the King,
Who had the thought of marrying
Some dame more fertile, and who sent
A wily man with this intent
To spy the countries out and find
Some great king's daughter, wise and kind,
And fresh, and fair in face and limb,
In all things a fit mate for him.
So in short time it came to pass
Again the King well wedded was,
And hoped once more to have a son.
And when this fair dame he had won,
A year in peace he dwelt with her,
Until the time was drawing near
When first his eyes beheld that foe,
Dead as he deemed these years ago.
Now at that time, as custom was,
His daughter was about to pass
Unto a distant house of his,
Built by some king for worldly bliss
In ancient days: there, far removed
From courts or towns, his dame beloved
The dead king had been wont to see
Play mid the summer greenery;
Or like Erigone of old
Stand in the vineyards girt with gold,
To queen it o'er the vintagers,
Half worshipping that face of hers.
Long years agone these folk were passed,
Their crimes forgotten, or else cast
Into the glowing crucible
Of time, that tempers all things well,
That maketh pleasure out of pain,
And out of ruin golden gain;
Nathless, unshaken still, there stood
The towers and ramparts red as blood;
Wherein their lives had passed away;
And still the lovely gardens lay
About them, changed, but smiling still,
As in past time, on good or ill.
Thither the Princess Cecily
Must go awhile in peace to be;
For now, midst care, and doubt, and toil,
Proud words drawn back, and half-healed broil,
The King had found one meet to wed
His daughter, of great goodlihead,
Wealth, and unbroken royalty.
And now he said to her, when she
Was setting out for that fair place,
"O daughter, thou shalt see my face
Before a month is fully gone,
Nor wilt thou see me then alone;
For that man shall be with me then,
Whom I have chosen from all men
To hold the treasure of my life,
Full sore he longs to see his wife,
Nor needst thou fear him for thy part,
Who holdeth many a woman's heart
As the net holds the silvery fish.
Farewell—and all that thou mayst wish
I pray God grant thee."
Therewithal
He kissed her, and from out the hall
She passed, not shamefaced, or afraid
Of what might happen; though, indeed,
Her heart of no man's heart had need
To make her happy, as she thought.

Ever the new sun daily brought
Fresh joy of life to her bedside,
The world before her open wide
Was spread, a place for joy and bliss.
Her lips had trembled with no kiss,
Wherewith love slayeth fear and shame;

Her grey eyes conscious of no blame,
Beheld unmoved the eyes of men;
Her hearing grew no dimmer when
Some unused footstep she might hear;
And unto no man was she dear,
But as some goddess might have been
When Greek men worshipped many a queen.

Now with her armed folk forth she rode
Unto that ancient fair abode,
And while the lark sung o'er the corn,
Love gilded not the waning morn;
And when the sun rose high above,
High thoughts she thought, but not of love;
And when that sun the world did leave,
He left no love to light the eve.
The moon no melancholy brought,
The dawn no vain, remorseful thought.
But all untroubled her sweet face
Passed 'neath the gate of that old place,
And there her bridegroom she abode.

But scarce was she upon the road
Ere news unto the King was brought
That Peter, the old Abbot, sought
To see him, having newly come
From the wild place that was his home
Across the forest; so the King
Bade him to enter, well willing
To hear what he might have to say;
Who, entering the great hall straightway,
Had with him an old, reverend man,
The sub-prior, father Adrian,
And five monks more, and therewithal
Ten of his folk, stout men and tall,
Who bore armed staves and coats of fence.
So, when he came to audience,
He prayed the King of this or that,
Whereof my tale-teller forgat,
And graciously the King heard all,
And said at last, "Well, what may fall,
Thou go'st not hence, fair lord, to-day;
Unless in vain a king must pray,
Thou and thy monks shall eat with me;
While feast thine axe-men merrily."
Withal, he eyed the Abbot's folk
In careless mood, then once more spoke,
"Tall men thou feedest, by the rood,
Lord Abbot! come they from the wood?
Dwell many more such thereabout?
Fain were I such should swell the shout
When I am armed, and rank meets rank."
But as he spoke his loud voice sank
Wavering, nor heard he aught at all
Of the faint noises of the hall,
Or what the monk in answer said;
For, looking from a steel-clad head,
Those eyes again did he behold,
That erst from 'neath the locks of gold
Kindly and bold, but soft with awe,
Beneath the apple-boughs he saw.
But when thereof he surely knew
Pale to the very lips he grew.
Till gathering heart within a while
With the faint semblance of a smile,
He seemed to note the Abbot's words
That he heard not; then from the lords
He turned, and facing Michael said,
"Raise up the steel-cap from thine head,
That I may see if thou look'st bold;
Methinks, I know thy face of old,
Whence com'st thou?"
Michael lifted straight
From off his brow the steel cap's weight,
And showed the bright locks curling round
His fresh and ruddy face, sun-browned;
And in a voice clear as a bell,
Told all his story, till he fell
Sore wounded in that dismal vale,
And said withal, "My lord, the tale
Of what came after, none knoweth
Better than he, who, from ill death
Saved me that tide, and made me man,
My lord, the sub-prior Adrian."
"Speak on then, father," quoth the King,
Making as he was hearkening.
"My lord," said Adrian, "I, who then
Was but a server of poor men,
Outside our Abbey walls, one day
Was called by one in poor array,
A charcoal-burner's lad, who said
That soon his father would be dead,
And that of all things he would have
His rights, that he his soul might save.
I made no tarrying at that word,
But took between mine hands the Lord,
And bade the boy bear forth the bell;
For though few folk there were to tell
Who passed that way, nathless, I trow
The beasts were glad that news to know.
"Well, by the pinewood's skirts we went
While through its twilight the bell sent
A heavenly tinkling; but the lad
'Gan telling me of fears he had
Of elves who dwell within the wood.
I chid him thereat, as was good,
Bidding him note Whom in mine hands
I held, The Ransom of all Lands.
But as the firwood's dim twilight
Waxed into day, and fair and bright
The evening sun showed through the trees,
Our ears fanned by the evening breeze,
The galloping of horse-hoofs heard,
Wherewith my page hung back afeard

Of elves and such-like; but I said,
'Wilt thou thy father should be dead
Ere we can reach him? Oh my son,
Fear not that aught can stay This One.'
"Therewith I smote my mule, and he
Ran forward with me hastily
As fearing to be left behind.
Well, as we went, what should we find
Down by the stream, but this my son,
Who seemed as though his days were done;
For in his side a knife there stood
Wherefrom ran out a stream of blood,
Soaking the grass and water-mint;
Then, I dismounting, we by dint
Of all our strength, the poor youth laid
Upon my mule, and down a glade
Of oaks and hollies then we passed,
And reached the woodman's home at last:
A poor hut, built of wattled wood,
And by its crooked gable stood
A ruinous shed, unroofed and old,
That beasts of burden once did hold.
—Thyself, my lord, mayst know it well,
Since thereabout the wild swine dwell;
And hart, and hind, and roe are there—
So the lad's wounds I staunched with care
Forthwith, and then the man I shrived,
Who none the less got well and lived
For many a day: then back I went
And the next day our leech I sent
With drugs to tend upon the lad.
Who soon was as he ne'er had had
A hurt at all: and he being well
We took him in our house to dwell,
And taught him letters; and, indeed,
Before long, Latin could he read
As well as I; but hath no will
To turn unto religion still.
Yet is he good and doth no wrong;
And being thereto both hale and strong,
My lord, the Abbot, sayeth of him,
'He shall serve God with heart and limb,
Not heart and voice.' Therefore, my lord,
Thou seest him armed with spear and sword
For their defence who feed him still,
Teach him, and guard his soul from ill.
Ho, Michael! hast thou there with thee
The fair-wrought knife I first did see
Deep in thy side?—there, show it now
Unto the King, that he may know
Our tale is not a thing of nought."
Withal the King, with eyes distraught
Amidst his anxious face and pale,
Sat leaning forward through this tale,
Scarce noting here and there a word.
But all being told, at last he heard
His own voice changed, and harsh, and low,
That said, "Fair lord, I fain would know,
Since this your man-at-arms seems true,
What thing will he be worth to you;
For better had he wear my rose
Than loiter in your Abbey-close,
Poring o'er books no man can read."
"O sire!" the monk said, "if thy need
Be great of such men, let him go;
My men-at-arms need make no show
Of fairness, nor should ladies miss,
E'en as thou say'st, such men as this."
Laughing he spoke; the King the while,
His pale face puckering to a smile;
Then, as in some confusèd dream,
In Michael's hand he saw the gleam
Of that same steel remembered well,
The gift he gave to Samuel;
Drawn from his father's ancient chest
To do that morn his own behest.
And as he now beheld its sheen,
The twining stem of gold and green,
The white scroll with the letters black,—
Strike! for no dead man cometh back!
He hardened yet his heart once more,
And grown unhappy as before,
When last he had that face in sight,
Now for the third time come to light,
Once more was treacherous, fierce, and fell.
Now was the Abbot feasted well
With all his folk, then went away;
But Michael clad in rich array
Became the King's man, and was thought
By all most happy to be brought
Unto such hopeful fair estate.

For ten days yet the King did wait,
Which past, for Michael did he send,
And he being come, said to him, "Friend,
Take now this letter from my hand
And go unto our southern land;
My captain Hugh shall go with thee
For one day's journey, then shall he
Tell thee which way thou hast to ride:
The third day thence about noon-tide
If thou dost well, thou shouldst be close
Unto my Castle of the Rose
Where dwells my daughter; needs it is
That no man living should see this
Until that thou within my wall
Hast given it to the seneschal;
Be wise and wary then, that thou
Mayst think of this that happeneth now
As birthday to thine high estate."
So said he, knowing not that fate
Was dealing otherwise than he.
But Michael going, presently
Met Hugh, a big man rough and black

And who of nought but words had lack,
With him he mounted, and set forth
And daylong rode on from the north.
Now if the King had hope that Hugh
Some deed like Samuel's might do
I know not; certes nought he said
To that hard heart and narrow head,
Who knew no wiles but wiles of war,
And was as true as such men are;
Yet had there been a tale to tell
If Michael had not held him well,
And backward still the wrath had turned
Wherewith his heart not seldom burned
At scornful words his fellow said.
At last they reached cross ways that led
One west, one southward still, whereat
Hugh, taking off his feathered hat,
Bowed low in scorn, and said, "Fair sir,
Unto the westward must I spur,
While you go southward, soon to get,
I doubt not, an earl's coronet;
Farewell, my lord, and yet beware
Thou dost not at my lady stare
Too hard, lest thou shouldst plumb the moat,
Or have a halter round thy throat."
But Michael to his scoff said nought,
But upon high things set his thought
As his departing hooves he heard.
And still betwixt the hedgerows spurred,
And when the twilight was o'erpast
At a small inn drew rein at last,
And slept that night as such folk can;
And while next morn the thrushes ran
Their first course through the autumn dew
The gossamers did he dash through,
And on his way rode steadily
The live-long day, nor yet was he
Alone, as well might be that day,
Since a fair town was in his way.
Stout hinds he passed, and yeomen good,
And friars of the heavy hood;
And white-coifed housewives mounted high
Above their maunds, while merrily
The well-shod damsel trudged along
Beside them, sending forth a song
As little taught as is a bird's;
And good men, good wives, priests, and herds,
And merry maids failed not to send
Good wishes for his journey's end
Athwart him, as still on he sped,
Free from all evil thoughts or dread.

Withal again the day went by,
And in that city's hostelry
He slept, and by the dawn of day
Next morn again was on his way,
And leaving the scarce wakened street
The newly risen sun did greet
With cheerful heart. His way wound on
Still up and up, till he had won
Up to a great hill's chalky brow,
Whence looking back he saw below
The town spread out; church, square, and street,
And baily, crawling up the feet
Of the long yew-besprinkled hill;
And in the fragrant air and still,
Seeming to gain new life from it,
The doves from roof to roof did flit:
The early fires sent up their smoke
That seemed to him to tell of folk
New wakened unto great delight:
For he upon that morning bright,
So joyous felt, so free from pain,
He seemed as he were born again
Into some new immortal state
That knew no envy, fear, or hate.
Now the road turned to his left hand
And led him through a table-land,
Windy and barren of all grain;
But where a hollow specked the plain
The yew-trees hugged the sides of it,
And mid them did the woodlark flit,
Or sang well sheltered from the wind,
And all about the sheep did find
Sweet grass, the while the shepherd's song
Rang clear as Michael sped along.
Long time he rode, till suddenly,
When now the sun was broad and high,
From out a hollow where the yew
Still guarded patches of the dew,
He rode and saw that he had won
That highland's edge; he gazed upon
A valley that beneath the haze
Of that most fair of autumn days,
Showed glorious; fair with golden sheaves,
Rich with the darkened autumn leaves,
Gay with the water-meadows green,
The bright blue streams that lay between,
The miles of beauty stretched away
From that bleak hill-side bare and grey;
Till white cliffs over slopes of vine,
Drew 'gainst the sky a broken line.
And 'twixt the vineyards and the stream
Michael saw gilded spirelets gleam;
For, hedged with many a flowery close,
There lay the Castle of the Rose,
His hurried journey's aim and end.

Then downward he began to wend,
And 'twixt the flowery hedges sweet
He heard the hook smite down the wheat,
And murmur of the unseen folk;
But when he reached the stream that broke
The golden plain, but leisurely

He passed the bridge; for he could see
The masters of that ripening realm,
Cast down beneath an ancient elm
Upon a little strip of grass,
From hand to hand the pitcher pass;
While on the turf beside them lay
The ashen-handled sickles grey,
The matters of their cheer between:
Slices of white cheese, specked with green,
And green-striped onions and ryebread,
And summer apples faintly red,
Even beneath the crimson skin;
And yellow grapes, well ripe and thin,
Plucked from the cottage gable-end.

And certes Michael felt their friend
Hearing their voices, nor forgot
His boyhood, and the pleasant spot
Beside the well-remembered stream;
And friendly did this water seem
As through its white-flowered weeds it ran
Bearing good things to beast and man.
Yea, as the parapet he passed,
And they a greeting toward him cast,
Once more he felt a boy again;
As though beneath the harvest wain
He was asleep, by that old stream,
And all these things were but a dream—
The King, the Squire, the hurrying ride
Unto the lonely quagmire side;
The sudden pain, the deadly swoon,
The feverish life from noon to noon;
The tending of the kind old man,
The black and white Dominican,
The hour before the Abbot's throne,
The poring o'er old books alone,
In summer morns; the King again,
The envious greetings of strange men;
This mighty horse and rich array,
This journey on an unknown way.
Surely he thought to wake from it,
And once more by the waggon sit,
Blinking upon the sunny mill.
But not for either good or ill
Shall he see one of all those days;
On through the quivering noontide haze
He rode, and now on either hand
Heavy with fruit the trees did stand;
Nor had he ridden long, ere he
The red towers of the house could see
Grey on the wind-beat southern side:
And soon the gates thrown open wide
He saw; the long-fixed drawbridge down,
The moat, with lilies overgrown,
Midst which the gold-scaled fishes lay:
Such peace was there for many a day.
And deep within the archway's shade
The warder on his cloak was laid,
Dozing, one hand upon a harp.
And nigh him a great golden carp
Lay stiff with all his troubles done,
Drawn from the moat ere yet the sun
Was high, and nigh him was his bane,
An angling rod of Indian cane.
Now hearing Michael's horse-hooves smite
The causeway, shading from the light
His eyes, as one scarce yet awake,
He made a shift his spear to take,
And, eyeing Michael's badge the while,
Rose up, and with a lazy smile,
Said, "Ho! fair sir, abide, abide,
And show why hitherward ye ride
Unto my lady's royal home."
Said Michael, "From the King I come,
As by my badge ye well may see;
And letters have I here with me
To give my lord the Seneschal."
"Yea," said the man, "but in the hall
He feasteth now; what haste is there,
Certes full quickly cometh care;
And sure I am he will not read
Thy letters, or to aught give heed
Till he has played out all the play,
And every guest has gone away;
So thou, O damoiseau, must wait;
Tie up thine horse anigh the gate,
And sit with me, and thou shalt hear
The Kaiser lieth on his bier.
Thou laughest—hast thou never heard
Of this same valorous Red Beard,
And how he died? Well, I can sing
Of many another dainty thing,
Thou wilt not a long while forget
The budget is not empty yet.
—Peter! I think thou mockest me,
But thou art young and fair perdie,
I wish thee luck—well, thou mayest go
And feel the afternoon wind blow
Within Dame Bertha's pleasance here;
She who was held so lief and dear,
All this was built but for her sake;
Who made the hearts of men to ache
And dying full of years and shame
Yet left an unforgotten name—
God rest her soul!"
Michael the while
Hearkened his talking with a smile,
Then said, "O friend, I think to hear
Both '*The King lieth on his bier*'
And many another song of thee,
Ere I depart; but now show me
The pleasance of the ancient queen,
For these red towers above the green
Seem like the gates of Paradise,

That surely somewhere through them lies."
Then said the warder, "That may be
If thou know'st what may come to thee,
When past the drawbridge thou hast gone,
Upon the left three steps of stone
Lead to a path beneath the wall
Of the great court, that folk now call
The falconer's path, nor canst thou miss
Going thereby, to find the bliss
Thou look'st for, since the path ends there,
And through a wicket gilded fair
The garden lies where thou wouldst be:
Nor will I fail to come to thee
Whene'er my Lord the Seneschal
Shall pass well fed from out the hall."
Then Michael, thanking him, passed on,
And soon the gilded wicket won,
And went into that pleasance sweet,
And wandered there with wary feet
And open mouth, as though he deemed
That in some lovely dream he dreamed,
And feared to wake to common day,
So fair was all; and e'en decay
Brought there but pensive loveliness,
Where autumn those old walls did bless
With wealth of fruit, and through the grass
Unscared the spring-born thrush did pass,
Who yet knew nought of winter-tide.
So wandering, to a fountain's side
He came, and o'er the basin hung,
Watching the fishes, as he sung
Some song remembered from of old,
Ere yet the miller won that gold.
But soon made drowsy with his ride,
And the warm hazy autumn-tide,
And many a musical sweet sound,
He cast him down upon the ground,
And watched the glittering water leap,
Still singing low, nor thought to sleep.
But scarce three minutes had gone by
Before, as if in mockery,
The starling chattered o'er his head,
And nothing he remembered,
Nor dreamed of aught that he had seen.

Meanwhile unto that garden green
Had come the Princess, and with her
A maiden that she held right dear,
Who knew the inmost of her mind,
Those twain, as the warm scented wind
Played with their raiment or their hair,
Had late been running here and there,
Chasing each other merrily,
As maids do, thinking no one by;
But now, well wearied therewithal,
Had let their gathered garments fall
About their feet, and slowly went:
And through the leaves a murmur sent,
As of two happy doves that sing
The soft returning of the spring.
But of the two the Princess spoke
The less, but into laughter broke
Not seldom, and would redden oft
As on her lips her finger soft
She laid, as still the other maid,
Half grave, half smiling, follies said.
So in their walk they drew anigh
That fountain in the midst, whereby
Lay Michael sleeping, dreaming nought
Of such fair things so nigh him brought;
They, when the fountain shaft was past,
Beheld him on the ground down-cast,
And stopped at first, until the maid
Stepped lightly forward to the shade,
And when she had gazed there awhile
Came running back again, a smile
Parting her lips, and her bright eyes
Afire with many fantasies;
And ere the Lady Cecily
Could speak a word, "Hush! hush!" said she;
"Did I not say that he would come
To woo thee in thy peaceful home
Before thy father brought him here?
Come, and behold him, have no fear!
The great bell would not wake him now,
Right in his ears."
"Nay, what dost thou?
The Princess said; "Let us go hence:
Thou know'st I give obedience
To what my father bids; but I
A maid full fain would live and die,
Since I am born to be a queen."
"Yea, yea, for such as thou hast seen,
That may be well," the other said.
"But come now, come; for by my head
This one must be from Paradise;
Come swiftly then, if thou art wise
Ere aught can snatch him back again."
She caught her hand, and not in vain
She prayed; for now some kindly thought
To Cecily's brow fair colour brought,
And quickly 'gan her heart to beat
As love drew near those eyes to greet,
Who knew him not till that sweet hour.

So over the fair, pink-edged flower,
Softly she stepped; but when she came
Anigh the sleeper, lovely shame
Cast a soft mist before her eyes
Full filled of many fantasies.
But when she saw him lying there
She smiled to see her mate so fair;
And in her heart did Love begin
To tell his tale, nor thought she sin

To gaze on him that was her own,
Not doubting he was come alone
To woo her, whom midst arms and gold
She deemed she should at first behold;
And with that thought love grew again
Until departing was a pain,
Though fear grew with that growing love,
And with her lingering footsteps strove,
As from the place she turned to go,
Sighing and murmuring words but low.
But as her raiment's hem she raised,
And for her merry fellow gazed
Shamefaced and changed, she met her eyes
Turned grave and sad with ill surprise;
Who while the Princess mazed did stand
Had drawn from Michael's loosened band
The King's scroll, which she held out now
To Cecily, and whispered low,
"Read, and do quickly what thou wilt,
Sad, sad! such fair life to be spilt:
Come further first."
With that they stepped
A pace or two from where he slept,
And then she read,
"*Lord Seneschal,*
On thee and thine may all good fall;
Greeting hereby the King sendeth,
And biddeth thee to put to death
His enemy who beareth this;
And as thou lovest life and bliss,
And all thy goods thou holdest dear,
Set thou his head upon a spear
A good half furlong from the gate.
Our coming hitherward to wait—
So perish the King's enemies!"
She read, and scarcely had her eyes
Seen clear her father's name and seal,
Ere all love's power her heart did feel,
That drew her back in spite of shame,
To him who was not e'en a name
To her a little hour agone.
Panting she said, "Wait thou alone
Beside him, watch him carefully
And let him sleep if none draw nigh;
If of himself he waketh, then
Hide him until I come again,
When thou hast told him of the snare.
If thou betrayest me beware!
For death shall be the least of all
The ills that on thine head shall fall.
What say I, thou art dear to me,
And doubly dear now shalt thou be,
Thou shalt have power and majesty,
And be more queen in all than I—
Few words are best, be wise, be wise!"

Withal she turned about her eyes
Once more, and swiftly as a man
Betwixt the garden trees she ran,
Until, her own bower reached at last,
She made good haste, and quickly passed
Unto her secret treasury.
There, hurrying since the time was nigh
For folk to come from meat, she took
From 'twixt the leaves of a great book
A royal scroll, signed, sealed, but blank,
Then, with a hand that never shrank
Or trembled, she the scroll did fill
With these words, writ with clerkly skill,—
"*Unto the Seneschal, Sir Rafe,*
Who holdeth our fair castle safe,
Greeting and health! O well-beloved,
Know that at this time we are moved
To wed our daughter, so we send
Him who bears this, our perfect friend,
To be her bridegroom; so do thou
Ask nought of him, since well we know
His race and great nobility,
And how he is most fit to be
Our son; therefore make no delay,
But wed the twain upon the day
Thou readest this: and see that all
Take oath to him, whate'er shall fall
To do his bidding as our heir;
So doing still be lief and dear
As I have held thee yet to be."
She cast the pen down hastily
At that last letter, for she heard
How even now the people stirred
Within the hall: nor dared she think
What bitter potion she must drink
If now she failed; so falsely bold
That life or death did she enfold
Within its cover, making shift
To seal it with her father's gift,
A signet of cornelian.

Then swiftly down the stairs she ran
And reached the garden; but her fears
Brought shouts and thunder to her ears,
That were but lazy words of men
Full-fed, far off; nay, even when
Her limbs caught up her flying gown
The noise seemed loud enough to drown
The twitter of the autumn birds,
And her own muttered breathless words,
That to her heart seemed loud indeed.
Yet therewithal she made good speed
And reached the fountain seen of none
Where yet abode her friend alone,
Watching the sleeper, who just now
Turned in his sleep and muttered low.
Therewith fair Agnes saying nought
From out her hand the letter caught;

And while she leaned against the stone
Stole up to Michael's side alone,
And with a cool, unshrinking hand
Thrust the new scroll deep in his band,
And turned about unto her friend;
Who having come unto the end
Of all her courage, trembled there
With face upturned for fresher air,
And parted lips grown grey and pale,
And limbs that now began to fail,
And hands wherefrom all strength had gone,
Scarce fresher than the blue-veined stone
That quivering still she strove to clutch.
But when she felt her lady's touch,
Feebly she said, "Go! let me die
And end this sudden misery
That in such wise has wrapped my life,
I am too weak for such a strife,
So sick I am with shame and fear;
Would thou hadst never brought me here!"
But Agnes took her hand and said,
"Nay, queen, and must we three be dead
Because thou fearest? all is safe
If boldly thou wilt face Sir Rafe."

So saying, did she draw her hence,
Past tree and bower, and high pleached fence
Unto the garden's further end,
And left her there and back did wend,
And from the house made haste to get
A gilded maund wherein she set
A flask of ancient island wine,
Ripe fruits and wheaten manchets fine,
And many such a delicate
As goddesses in old time ate,
Ere Helen was a Trojan queen;
So passing through the garden green
She cast her eager eyes again
Upon the spot where he had lain,
But found it empty, so sped on
Till she at last the place had won
Where Cecily lay, faint, weak, and white
Within that fair bower of delight.
Her straight she made to eat and drink,
And said, "See now thou dost not shrink
From this thy deed; let love slay fear
Now, when thy life shall grow so dear,
Each minute should seem loss to thee,
If thou for thy felicity
Couldst stay to count them; for I say,
This day shall be thy happy day."
Therewith she smiled to see the wine
Embraced by her fair fingers fine;
And her sweet face grow bright again
With sudden pleasure after pain.
Again she spoke, "What is this word
That dreaming, I perchance, have heard,
But certainly remember well;
That some old soothsayer did tell
Strange things unto my lord, the King,
That on thy hand the spousal ring
No Kaiser's son, no King should set,
But one a peasant did beget—
What sayst thou?"
But the Queen flushed red
"Such fables I have heard," she said;
"And thou—is it a scathe to me,
The bride of such a man to be?"
"Nay," said she, "God will have him King;
How shall we do a better thing
With this or that one than He can;
God's friend must be a goodly man.'
But with that word she heard the sound
Of folk who through the mazes wound
Bearing the message; then she said,
"Be strong, pluck up thine hardihead,
Speak little, so shall all be well,
For now our own tale will they tell."

And even as she spoke they came
And all the green place was aflame
With golden raiment of the lords;
While Cecily, noting not their words,
Rose up to go; and for her part
By this had fate so steeled her heart,
Scarce otherwise she seemed, than when
She passed before the eyes of men
At tourney or high festival.
But when they now had reached the hall,
And up its very steps they went,
Her head a little down she bent;
Nor raised it till the dais was gained
For fear that love some monster feigned
To be a god, and she should be
Smit by her own bolt wretchedly.
But at the rustling, crowded dais
She gathered heart her eyes to raise,
And there beheld her love, indeed,
Clad in her father's serving weed,
But proud, and flushed, and calm withal,
Fearless of aught that might befal,
Nor too astonied, for he thought,—
"From point to point my life is brought
Through wonders till it comes to this;
And trouble cometh after bliss,
And I will bear all as I may,
And ever as day passeth day,
My life will hammer from the twain,
Forging a long enduring chain."
But midst these thoughts their young eyes met,
And every word did he forget
Wherewith men name unhappiness
As read again those words did bless
With double blessings his glad ears.

And if she trembled with her fears,
And if with doubt, and love, and shame,
The rosy colour went and came
In her sweet cheeks and smooth bright brow,
Little did folk think of it now,
But as of maiden modesty,
Shamefaced to see the bridegroom nigh.
And now when Rafe the Seneschal
Had read the message down the hall,
And turned to her, quite calm again,
Her face had grown, and with no pain
She raised her serious eyes to his
Grown soft and pensive with his bliss,
And said,
"Prince, thou art welcome here,
Where all my father loves is dear,
And full trust do I put in thee,
For that so great nobility
He knoweth in thee; be as kind
As I would be to thee, and find
A happy life from day to day,
Till all our days are past away."
What more than found the bystanders
He found within this speech of hers,
I know not; some faint quivering
In the last words; some little thing
That checked the cold words' even flow.
But yet they set his heart aglow,
And he in turn said eagerly:—
"Surely I count it nought to die
For him who brought me unto this;
For thee, who givest me this bliss;
Yea, even dost me such a grace
To look with kind eyes in my face,
And send sweet music to my ears."
But at his words she, mazed with tears,
Seemed faint, and failing quickly, when
Above the low hum of the men
Uprose the sweet bells' sudden clang,
As men unto the chapel rang;
While just outside the singing folk
Into most heavenly carols broke.
And going softly up the hall
Boys bore aloft the verges tall
Before the Bishop's gold-clad head.
Then forth his bride young Michael led,
And nought to him seemed good or bad
Except the lovely hand he had;
But she the while was murmuring low,
"If he could know, if he could know,
What love, what love, his love should be!"

But while mid mirth and minstrelsy
The ancient Castle of the Rose
Such pageant to the autumn shows
The King sits ill at ease at home,
For in these days the tidings come
That he who in his line should wed,
Lies in his own town stark and dead,
Slain in a tumult of the street.
Brooding on this he deemed it meet,
Since nigh the day was come, when she
Her bridegroom's visage looked to see,
To hold the settled day with her,
And bid her at the least to wear
Dull mourning guise for gold and white,
So on another morning bright,
When the whole promised month was past,
He drew anigh the place at last
Where Michael's dead head, looking down
Upon the highway with a frown,
He doubted not at last to see.
So 'twixt the fruitful greenery
He rode, scarce touched by care the while,
Humming a roundel with a smile.
Withal, ere yet he drew anigh,
He heard their watch-horn sound from high,
Nor wondered, for their wont was so,
And well his banner they might know
Amidst the stubble lands afar:
But now a distant point of war
He seemed to hear, and bade draw rein,
But listening cried, "Push on again!
They do but send forth minstrelsy
Because my daughter thinks to see
The man who lieth on his bier."
So on they passed, till sharp and clear
They heard the pipe and shrill fife sound;
And restlessly the King glanced round
To see what he had striven for,
The crushing of that Sage's lore,
The last confusion of that fate.
But drawn still nigher to the gate
They turned a sharp bend of the road,
And saw the pageant that abode
The solemn coming of the King.

For first on each side, maids did sing,
Dressed in gold raiment; then there came
The minstrels in their coats of flame;
And then the many-coloured lords,
The knights' spears, and the swordmen's swords,
Backed by the glittering wood of bills.
So now, presaging many ills,
The King drew rein, yet none the less
He shrank not from his hardiness,
But thought, "Well, at the worst I die,
And yet perchance long life may lie
Before me—I will hold my peace;
The dumb man's borders still increase."
But as he strengthened thus his heart
He saw the crowd before him part,
And down the long melodious lane,
Hand locked in hand there passed the twain,

As fair as any earth has found,
Clad as kings' children are, and crowned.
Behind them went the chiefest lords,
And two old knights with sheathèd swords
The banners of the kingdom bore.
But now the king had pondered sore,
By when they reached him; though, indeed,
The time was short unto his need,
Betwixt his heart's first startled pang
And those old banner-bearers' clang
Anigh his saddle-bow: but he
Across their heads scowled heavily,
Not saying aught awhile: at last,
Ere any glance at them he cast,
He said, "Whence come ye? what are ye?
What play is this ye play to me?"
None answered,—Cecily, faint and white,
The rather Michael's hand clutched tight,
And seemed to speak, but not one word
The nearest to her could have heard.
Then the King spoke again,—"Sir Rafe,
Meseems this youngling came here safe
A week agone?"
"Yea, sir," he said;
"Therefore the twain I straight did wed,
E'en as thy letters bound me to."
"And thus thou diddest well to do,"
The King said. "Tell me on what day
Her maiden life she put away."
"Sire, the eleventh day this is
Since that they gained their earthly bliss;"
Quoth old Sir Rafe. The King said nought,
But with his head bowed down in thought,
Stood a long while; but at the last
Upward a smiling face he cast,
And cried aloud above the folk,
"Shout for the joining of the yoke
Betwixt these twain! And thou, fair lord,
Who dost so well my every word,
Nor makest doubt of anything,
Wear thou the collar of thy King;
And a duke's banner, cut foursquare,
Henceforth shall men before thee bear
In tourney and in stricken field.
"But this mine heir shall bear my shield,
Carry my banner, wear my crown,
Ride equal with me through my town,
Sit on the same step of the throne;
In nothing will I reign alone;
Nor be ye with him miscontent,
For that with little ornament
Of gold and folk to you he came;
For he is of an ancient name
That needeth not the clink of gold—
The ancientest the world doth hold;
For in the fertile Asian land,
Where great Damascus now doth stand,
Ages agone his line was born,
Ere yet men knew the gift of corn;
And there, anigh to Paradise,
His ancestors grew stout and wise;
And certes he from Asia bore
No little of their piercing lore.
"Look then to have great happiness,
For every wrong shall he redress."

Then did the people's shouting drown
His clatter as he leapt adown;
And taking in each hand a hand
Of the two lovers, now did stand
Betwixt them on the flower-strewn way,
And to himself meanwhile 'gan say,—

"How many an hour might I have been
Right merry in the gardens green;
How many a glorious day had I
Made happy with some victory;
What noble deeds I might have done,
What bright renown my deeds have won;
What blessings would have made me glad;
What little burdens had I had;
What calmness in the hope of praise;
What joy of well-accomplished days,
If I had let these things alone;
Nor sought to sit upon my throne
Like God between the cherubim.
But now—but now, my days wax dim,
And all this fairness have I tost
Unto the winds, and all have lost
For nought, for nought! yet will I strive
My little end of life to live;
Nor will I look behind me more,
Nor forward to the doubtful shore."

With that he made the sign to turn,
And straight the autumn air did burn
With many a point of steel and gold;
And through the trees the carol rolled
Once more, until the autumn thrush
Far off 'gan twittering on his bush,
Made mindful of the long-lived spring.

So mid sweet song and tabouring,
And shouts amid the apple-grove,
And soft caressing of his love,
Began the new King Michael's reign.
Nor will the poor folk see again
A king like him on any throne,
Or such good deeds to all men done:
For then, as saith the chronicle,
It was the time, as all men tell,
When scarce a man would stop to gaze
At gold crowns hung above the ways.

He ended; and midst those who heard were some
Who, midst his tale, half dreamed they were at home,
Round the great fire upon the winter night;
And, with the memory of the fresh delight
Wherewith they first had heard that story told,
Forgetting not they were grown weak and old,
Yet felt as if they had at least grown grey
Within the land left for so many a day.
He, with the gestures they were wont to see,
So told his tale, so strange with eld was he,
Just so he stammered, and in just such wise
He sighed, beginning fresh, as their young eyes,
Their ears, in happy days passed long ago,
Had ever noted other old men do,
When they, full filled with their quick-coming joys,
Would gaze on old folk as on carven toys.

But he being silent, silently awhile
They mused on these things, masking with a smile
The vain regrets that in their hearts arose,
The while with eager talk the young folk chose
The parts that pleased them; but their elder hosts
Falling to talk, yet noted well the ghosts
Of old desires within their wasted eyes,
Till one by one the fresh-stirred memories,
So bitter-sweet, flickered and died away;
And as old men may do, whose hopes grew grey
Before their beards, they made a little mirth
Until the great moon rose upon the earth.

APRIL.

O FAIR midspring, besung so oft and oft,
How can I praise thy loveliness enow?
Thy sun that burns not, and thy breezes soft
That o'er the blossoms of the orchard blow,
The thousand things that 'neath the young leaves grow,
The hopes and chances of the growing year,
Winter forgotten long, and summer near.

When Summer brings the lily and the rose,
She brings us fear; her very death she brings
Hid in her anxious heart, the forge of woes;
And, dull with fear, no more the mavis sings.
But thou! thou diest not, but thy fresh life clings
About the fainting autumn's sweet decay,
When in the earth the hopeful seed they lay.

Ah! life of all the year, why yet do I
Amid thy snowy blossoms' fragrant drift,
Still long for that which never draweth nigh,
Striving my pleasure from my pain to sift,
Some weight from off my fluttering mirth to lift?
—Now, when far bells are ringing, "Come again,
Come back, past years! why will ye pass in vain?"

AND now the watery April sun lit up
Upon the fair board golden ewer and cup,
And over the bright silken tapestry
The fresh young boughs were gladdening every eye,
And round the board old faces you might see
Amidst the blossoms and their greenery.
So when the flutes were silent, and the birds,
Rejoicing in their flood of unknown words,
Were heard again, a silken-fastened book
A certain elder from his raiment took,
And said, "O friends, few words are best to-
And no new thing I bring you; yet ye may
Be pleased to hear an ancient tale again,
That, told so long ago, doth yet remain
Fresh e'en 'mongst us, far from the Argive land:
Which tale this book, writ wholly by mine hand,
Holds gathered up as I have heard it told.
"Surely I fear me, midst the ancient gold
Base metal ye will light on here and there,
Though I have noted everything with care,
And with good will have set down nothing new
Nor holds the land another book for you
That has the tale in full with nought beside,
So unto me let your good word betide;
Though, take it as ye may, no small delight
I had, herein this well-loved tale to write."

THE DOOM OF KING ACRISIUS.

ARGUMENT.

Acrisius, King of Argos, being warned by an oracle that the son of his daughter Danaë should slay him, shut her up in a brazen tower built for that end beside the sea: there, though no man could come nigh her, she nevertheless bore a son to Jove, and she and her new-born son, set adrift on the sea, came to the island of Seriphos. Thence her son, grown to manhood, set out to win the Gorgon's Head, and accomplished that end by the help of Minerva; and afterwards rescued Andromeda, daughter of Cepheus, from a terrible doom, and wedded her. Coming back to Seriphos he took his mother thence, and made for Argos, but by stress of weather came to Thessaly, and there, at Larissa, accomplished the prophecy, by unwittingly slaying Acrisius. In the end he founded the city of Mycenæ, and died there.

NOW of the King Acrisius shall ye hear,
Who, thinking he could free his life from fear,
Did that which brought but death on him at last.
In Argos did he reign in days long past,
And had one daughter, fair as man could see,
Called in the ancient stories Danaë;
But as her fairness day by day grew more
Unto his ears came wandering words of lore,
Which bade him wot that either soon or late
He should be taken in the toils of fate,
And by the fruit of his own daughter's womb
Be slain at last, and set within his tomb;
And therefore heavy sorrow on him fell,
That she whom he was bound to love so well
Must henceforth be his deadliest dread and woe.
Long time he pondered what were best to do;
And whiles he thought that he would send her forth
To wed some king far in the snowy north,
And whiles that by great gifts of goods and gold
Some lying prophet might be bought and sold
To swear his daughter he must sacrifice,
If he would yet find favour in the eyes
Of the dread gods who govern everything;
And sometimes seemed it better to the king,
That he might 'scape the shedding of her blood
By leaving her in some far lonely wood,
Wherein the Dryads might the maiden find,
Or beasts might slay her, following but their kind.
So passed his anxious days, until at last,
When many a plot through his vexed brain had passed,
He lacked the heart his flesh and blood to slay,
Yet neither would he she should go away
From out his sight, or be at large at all;
Therefore his wisest craftsmen did he call,
And bade them make for him a tower foursquare,
Such as no man had yet seen anywhere,
For therein neither stone or timber was
But all was fashioned of mere molten brass.

Now thither oft would maiden Danaë stray,
And watch its strange walls growing day by day,
Because, poor soul! she knew not anything
Of these forebodings of the fearful King,
Nor how he meted out for her this doom,
Therein to dwell as in a living tomb.
But on a day, she, coming there alone,
Found it all finished and the workmen gone,
And no one nigh, so through the open door
She entered, and went up from floor to floor,
And through its chambers wandered without dread;
And, entering one, she found therein a bed,
Dight daintily, as though to serve a queen;
And all the walls adorned with hangings green,
Tables and benches in good order set,
And all things new, by no one used as yet.
With that she murmured, "When again I see
My father, will I bid him tell to me
Who shall live here and die here, for, no doubt,
Whoever enters here shall ne'er go out:
Therefore the walls are made so high and great,
Therefore the bolts are measureless of weight,
The windows small, barred, turned unto the sea
That none from land may tell who here may be.
No doubt some man the King my father fears
Above all other, here shall pass his years.
Alas, poor soul! scarce shall he see the sun,
Or care to know when the hot day is done,

Or ever see sweet flowers again, or grass,
Or take much note of how the seasons pass.
Truly we folk who dwell in rest and ease
But lightly think of such abodes as these;
And I, who live wrapped round about with bliss,
Shall go from hence and soon forget all this:
For in my garden many a sweet flower blooms,
Wide open are the doors of all my rooms,
And lightly folk come in and lightly go;
And I have known as yet but childish woe."

Therewith she turned about to leave the place,
But as unto the door she set her face
A bitter wailing from outside she heard,
And somewhat therewithal she waxed afeard,
And stopped awhile; yet listening, she but thought,
"This is the man who to his doom is brought
By weeping friends, who come to see the last
Of that dear face they know shall soon be past
From them for ever." Then she 'gan to go
Adown the brazen stairs with footsteps slow.

But quick the shrieks and wailing drew anear,
Till in her ears it sounded sharp and clear,
And then she said, "Alas! and must I see
These weeping faces drawn with agony?
Would I had not come here to-day!" Withal
She started, as upon her ear did fall
The sound of shutting of the outer door,
And people coming up from floor to floor;
And paler then she grew, but moved to meet
The woful sounds and slow-ascending feet,
Shrinking with pity for that wretched one
Whose life of joy upon that day was done.

Thus down the stairs with saddened heart she passed,
And to a lower chamber came at last;
But as she went beneath the archway wide
The door was opened from the other side,
And in poured many maidens, whom she knew
For her own fair companions, leal and true;
And after them two men-at-arms there came,
With knitted brows and eyes downcast for shame.

But when those damsels saw her standing there,
Anew they wept, and tore their unbound hair;
But midst their wailing, still no word they said,
Until she spoke oppressed with sickening dread:
"O tell me what has happened to me then!
For is my father slain of outland men?
Or have the gods sent death upon the land?
Or is it mine own death that they command?
Alas, alas! but slay me quick, I pray,
Nor let me linger on from day to day,
Maddened with fear like this, that sickens me,
And makes me seem the half-dead thing ye see."

Then, like a man constrained, a soldier said
These cruel words unto the wretched maid:
"Lady, lose hope and fear now once for all;
Here must thou dwell betwixt brass wall and wall
Until the gods send gentle death to thee;
And these as erst thine handmaidens shall be.
And if thou askest why the thing is so,
Thus the King wills it, for a while ago
An oracle foretold that thou shouldst live
To have a son, who bitter death should give
Unto thy father; so, to save this shame
From falling on the glorious Argive name,
He deemed it well that thou shouldst live indeed,
But yet apart from man thy life shouldst lead.
So in this place thy days must pass away,
And we who are thy guards, from day to day
Will bring thee everything that thou mayst need.
But pardon us, constrained to do this deed
By the King's will, and oaths that we have sworn
Ere to this life of sorrow thou wert born."

Therewith they turned and went, and soon the sound
Of shutting doors smote like a deadly wound
Into her heart; and yet no word she spoke,
But fell as one beneath a deadly stroke.

Then they who there her fellows were to be
Bore up her body, groaning heavily,
Unto the chamber whither fate had led
Her feet that morn; and there upon the bed
They laid her body, and then sat around,
With heavy heads and hair that swept the ground,
To weep the passing of those happy days
When many an one their happy lot would praise.
But now and then, when bitterly would sting
The loss of some nigh-reached and longed-for thing,
Into a wail their weeping would arise.

Then in a while did Danaë ope her eyes,
And to her aching forehead raised her hand;
But when she saw that wan, dishevelled band,
She soon remembered this was no ill dream,
But that all things were e'en as they did seem,
Then she arose, but soon upon the bed
Sank down again, and hid her troubled head,
And moaned and moaned, and when a damsel came
And touched her hand, and called her by her name,
She knew her not, but turned her head away:
Nor did she know when dark night followed day.

So passed by many a day in mourning sore,
And weariness oppressed her evermore
In that unhappy prison-house of brass;
And yet a little the first sting did pass
That smote her, and she ate and drank and slept,
And fair and bright her body Venus kept,
Yea, such a grace the sea-born goddess fair
Did to her, that the ripples of her hair
Grew brighter, and the colour in her face
And lovely lips waned not in that sad place;

And daily grew her limbs in goodlihead;
Till, as she lay upon the golden bed,
You would have thought the Queen herself had come
To meet some love far from her golden home.
And once it happed at the first hour of day
In golden morn upon her bed she lay,
Newly awakened to her daily woe,
And heard the rough sea beat the rocks below,
The wheeling sea-gull screaming on the wing,
Sea-swallows swift, and many a happy thing,
Till bitterly the tears ran down her cheek,
And stretching forth her arms and fingers weak,
Twixt moans these piteous helpless words she said:—
"O Queen Diana, make me now thy maid,
And take me from this place and set me down
By the boar-haunted hills, that oak-woods crown,
Amid thy crowd of trim-girt maidens fair.
"And shall I not be safe from men-folk there,
Thou cruel King? when she is guarding me,
The mighty maid from whom the shepherds flee,
When in the gathering dusk 'twixt day and night,
The dead leaves tell them of her footsteps light,
Because they mind how dear Actæon bought
The lovely sight for which he never sought,
Diana naked in the water wan.
"Yea, what fear should I have of any man
When through the woods I, wandering merrily,
With girt-up gown, sharp sword upon the thigh,
Full quiver on the back, stout bow in hand,
Should tread with firm feet many a grassy land,
And grow strong-limbed in following up the deer,
And meet the lion's eyes with little fear?
"Alas! no doubt she hears not; many a maid
She has already, of no beast afraid,
Crisp-haired, with arms made meet for archery,
Whose limbs unclad no man shall ever see;
Though the birds see them, and the seeding grass
Harsh and unloving over them may pass,
When carelessly through rough and smooth they run,
And bough and briar catches many an one.
"Alas! why on these free maids is my thought,
When to such misery my life is brought?
I, who so long a happy maid have been,
The daughter of a great King and a Queen;
And why these fresh things do I think upon,
Who now shall see but little of the sun?
"Here every day shall have the same sad tale,
My weary damsels with their faces pale,
The dashing of the sea on this black rock;
The piping wind through cranny and through lock;
The sea-bird's cry, like mine grown hoarse and shrill,
The far-off sound of horn upon the hill,
The merry tune about the shepherd's home,
And all the things whereto I ne'er may come.
"O ye who rule below, I pray this boon,
I may not live here long, but perish soon,
Forgotten, but at peace, and feeling nought;
For even now it comes across my thought
That here my wretched body dwells alone,
And that my soul with all my hope is gone.

"Father, thy blood upon thine own head be
If any solace Venus send to me
Within this wretched place which thou hast made,
Of thine own flesh and blood too much afraid."

Truly Diana heard not, for that tide
Upon the green grass by a river side,
Wherein she had just bathed her body sweet,
She stooped to tie the sandals to her feet,
Her linen gown upon the herbage lay,
And round her was there standing many a may
Making her ready for the morning chase.
But so it happed that Venus by the place
Was passing, just arisen from the sea,
And heard the maid complaining bitterly,
So to the window-bars she drew anigh,
And thence unseen, she saw the maiden lie,
As on the grass herself she might have lain
When in the thicket lay Adonis slain;
For power and joy she smiled thereat, and thought
"She shall not suffer all this pain for nought."
And slowly for Olympus sailed away,
And thither came at hottest of the day.
Then through the heavenly courts she went, and when
She found the father both of gods and men,
She smiled upon him, and said, "Knowest thou
What deeds are wrought by men in Argos now?
Wherein a brazen tower well builded is,
That hides a maid away from all my bliss;
Since thereby thinks Acrisius to forego,
This doom that has been fated long ago,
That by his daughter's son he shall be slain;
Wherefore he puts the damsel to this pain
To see no man, and thinks to 'scape his doom
If she but live and die with barren womb;
And great dishonour is it unto me
That such a maiden lives so wretchedly;
And great dishonour is it to us all
That ill upon a guiltless head should fall
To save a King from what we have decreed.
Now, therefore, tell me, shall his impious deed
Save him alive, while she that might have borne
Great kings and glorious heroes, lives forlorn
Of love's delight, in solitude and woe?"

Then said the Thunderer, "Daughter, nowise so
Shall this be in the end; heed what shall fall,

And let none think that any brazen wall
Can let the gods from doing what shall be."

Now therewithal went Venus to the sea
Glad of her father's words, and, as she went,
Unseen the gladness of the spring she sent
Across the happy lands o'er which she moved,
Until all men felt joyous and beloved.
But while to Paphos carelessly she fared,
All day upon the tower the hot sun glared,
And Danaë within that narrow space
Went to and fro, and sometimes hid her face
Between her hands, moaning in her despair,
Or sometimes tore the fillets from her hair,
And sometimes would begin a piteous tale
Unto her maids, and in the midst would fail
For sobs and tears; but mostly would she sit
Over against the window, watching it,
And feel the light wind blowing from the sea
Against her face, with hands laid listlessly
Together in her lap; so passed the day,
And to their sleep her damsels went away,
And through the dead of night she slept awhile,
But when the dawn came, woke up with a smile,
As though she had forgotten all her pain,
But soon the heavy burden felt again,
And lay a wretch unhappy, till the sun
Drew nigh the sea's lip, and the night was done.
In that fresh morn was no one stirring yet,
And many a man his troubles did forget
Buried in sleep, but nothing she forgat.
She raised herself and up in bed she sat,
And towards the window turned round wearily
To watch the changing colours of the sky;
And many a time she sighed, and seemed as though
She would have told the story of her woe
To whatsoever god near by might be
Betwixt the grey sky and the cold grey sea;
But to her lips no sound at all would rise,
Except those oft-repeated heavy sighs.
And yet, indeed, within a little while
Her face grew calm, the shadow of a smile
Stole o'er her parted lips and sweet grey eyes,
And slowly from the bed did she arise,
And towards the window drew, and yet did seem,
Although her eyes were open, still to dream.
There on the sill she laid her slender hand,
And looking seaward, pensive did she stand,
And seemed as though she waited for the sun
To bring her news that evil days were done;
At last he came and cast his golden road
Over the green sea toward that lone abode,
And into Danaë's face his glory came
And lit her softly waving hair like flame.
But in his light she held out both her hands,
As though he brought her from some far-off lands
Healing for all her great distress and woe.

But yellower now the sunbeams seemed to grow
Not whiter as their wont is, and she heard
A tinkling sound that made her, half afeard,
Draw back a little from the fresh green sea,
Then to a clang the noise rose suddenly,
And gently was she smitten on the breast,
And some bright thing within her palm did rest,
And trickled down her shoulder and her side,
And on her limbs a little did abide,
Or lay upon her feet a little while.
Then in her face increased the doubtful smile,
While o'er her eyes a drowsy film there came,
And in her cheeks a flush as if of shame,
And, looking round about, could she behold
The chamber scattered o'er with shining gold,
That grew, till ankle-deep she stood in it.
Then through her limbs a tremor did there flit
As through white water runs the summer wind,
And many a wild hope came into her mind,
But her knees bent, and soft she sank down there,
And on the gold was spread her golden hair,
And like an ivory image still she lay,
Until the night again had hidden day.

But when again she lifted up her head,
She found herself laid soft within her bed,
While midmost of the room the taper shone,
And all her damsels from the place were gone,
And by her head a gold-robed man there stood,
At sight of whom the damsel's shamefast blood
Made all her face red to the golden hair,
And quick she covered up her bosom fair.

Then in a great voice said he, "Danaë,
Sweet child, be glad, and have no fear of me,
And have no shame, nor hide from thy new love
The breast that on this day has pillowed Jove.
Come now, come from that balmy nest of thine,
And stand with me beneath the taper's shine
That I may see thy beauty once again;
Then never shalt thou be in any pain,
But if thou liftest up thy face to Jove
I shall be kind to my sweet simple love;
I shall bethink me of thy body sweet,
From golden head to fair and dainty feet."
Then, trembling sore, from out the bed she came
And hid away her face for dread and shame,
But soon she trembled more for very love,
To feel the loving hands of mighty Jove
Draw down her hands, and kisses on the head
And tender bosom, as again he said,
"Now must I go; and sweet love, Danaë,
Fear nothing more that man can do to thee,
For soon shall come an ending to thy woe,
And thou shalt have a son whose name shall grow
Still greater, till the mountains melt away
And men no more can tell the night from day."

Then forth he sprang and o'er the sea did fly
And loud it thundered from a cloudless sky.

So when her damsels came to her next morn,
And thought to see her laid alow forlorn
Upon the bed, and looking out to sea
Moaning full oft, and sighing heavily,
They found her singing o'er a web of silk
Where through the even warp as white as milk
Quick flew the shuttle from her arm of snow,
And somewhat from her girded gown did show
On the black treadles both her rosy feet,
Moving a little as the tender wheat
Moves in the June when Zephyr blows on it,
So, like a goddess weaving did she sit.

But when she saw her maidens wondering stand
She ceased her song and spake and stayed her hand,
"If now ye see me merry of my mood
Be nought amazed, for e'en as die the good,
So die ill days; and now my heart is light,
For hearken; a fair dream I had last night,
That in his claws an eagle lifted me
And bore me to a land across the sea:
Wherefore I think that here I shall not die
But live to feel dew falling from the sky,
And set my feet deep in the meadow grass
And underneath the scented pine-trees pass,
Or in the garden feel the western breeze,
The herald of the rain, sweep through the trees,
Or in the hottest of the summer day,
Betwixt green banks within the mill-stream play.

"For either shall my father soon relent,
Or for my sake some marvel shall be sent,
And either way these doors shall open wide;
And then doubt not to see me soon a bride
With some king's amorous son before my feet.

"Ah! verily my life shall then be sweet;
Before these days I knew not life or death,
With little hope or fear I drew my breath,
But now when all this sorrow is o'erpast,
Then shall I feel how sweet life is at last,
And learn how dear is peace from all these fears.

"So no more will I waste my life in tears,
But pass the time as swiftly as may be,
Until ye step out on the turf with me."

Then glad they were, when such-like words they heard,
And yet some doubted and were sore afeard
That she had grown light-headed with her woe;
Dreading the time might come when she would throw
Her body on the ground and perish there,
Slain by her own hand mighty with despair.
Nathless the days more merrily went by
And from that prison men heard minstrelsy,
When nought but mourning fisher-folk afeard
Who passed that way, in other times had heard.

Yet truly Danaë said that all things pass
And are forgotten; in that house of brass
Forgotten was the stunning bitter pain
Wherewith she entered it, and yet again
In no long time, hope was forgotten too,
When wringing torments moaning from her drew,
And to and fro the pale scared damsels went,
And those her guards unto Acrisius sent.

But ere the messenger returned again
She had been eased of half her bitterest pain,
And on her breast a fair man-child was laid;
Then round the messenger her maids afraid
Drew weeping; but he charged them earnestly,
Ever to watch her in that chamber high,
Lest any man should steal the babe away,
And so to bide until there came a day
When on her feet she might arise and go,
Whereof by messengers the King must know;
So, threatening torments unendurable,
If any harm through treachery befell,
He left them, and no more to them he told,
But in his face the sooth they might behold.

Now, therefore, when some wretched days were past,
And trembling by the bed she stood at last,
She heard the opening of the outer door,
And footsteps came again from floor to floor,
And soon with all-armed men her chamber shone,
Who with few words now led her forth alone
Adown the stairs from out the brazen place;
And on her hot hands, and her tear-stained face
Half-fainting, the pine-scented air she felt,
And all about the salt sea savour smelt,
And in her ears the dashing of the sea
Rang ever; thus the God had set her free.

But by the shore further they led her still
To where the sea beat on a barren hill,
And a long stage of timber met the sea,
At end whereof was tossing fearfully
A little boat that had no oars or sail,
Or aught that could the mariner avail.
Thither with her their steps the soldiers bent,
And as along the narrow way they went
The salt waves leapt aloft to kiss her feet
And in the wind streamed out her tresses sweet;
But little heed she took of feet or head
For nought she doubted she to death was led,
But ever did she hold against her breast
The little babe, and spoke not for the rest;
No, not when in the boat they bade her go,
And 'twixt its bulwarks thin she lay alow,
Nor when adrift they set her presently
And all about was but the angry sea.

No word she said until the sun was down,
And she beheld the moon that on no town,
On no fair homestead, no green pasture shone,
But lit up the unwearied sea alone;
No word she said till she was far from shore
And on her breast the babe was wailing sore;
And then she lifted up her face to Jove,
And said, "O thou who once didst call me love,
Hast thou forgotten those fair words of thine,
When underneath the taper's glimmering shine
Thou bad'st me stand that thou mightst look on me,
And love thou call'dst me, and sweet Danaë?
Now on thy promised help to-day I call
For on what day can greater woe befall,
Than this wherein to-night my body is,
And brought thereto, O King, by thy sweet kiss?"
But neither did she pray the God in vain;
For straight he set himself to end her pain,
And while he cast on her a gentle sleep,
The winds within their houses did he keep
Except the west which soft on her did blow,
That swiftly through the sea the boat might go.

Far out to sea a certain isle doth lie
Men call Seriphos; craggy, steep, and high:
It rises up on every side but one,
And mariners its ill-famed headlands shun;
But toward the south the meads slope soft adown,
Until they meet the yellow sands and brown,
That slope themselves so gently to the sea,
The nymphs are hidden only to the knee
When half a mile of rippling water is
Between the waves that their white limbs do kiss
And the last wave that washes shells ashore.
To this fair place the west wind onward bore
The skiff that carried Danaë and her son,
And on the morn, when scarce the dusk was done,
Upon the sands the shallop ran aground;
And still they slept, and for awhile around
Their wretched bed the waves sang lullaby,
But sank at last and left the long strand dry.
Then uprose Danaë, and nothing knew
What land it was: about her sea-fowl flew;
Behind her back the yet retreating sea
Beat on the yellow sands unceasingly;
Landward she saw the low green meadows lie,
Dotted with homesteads, rich with elm-trees high;
And at her feet the little boat there lay
That happily had brought her on the way.
But as it happed, the brother of the King
Had ridden forth to hear the sea-fowl sing,
With hawk on fist, right early on that morn,
Hard by the place whereunto she was borne.
He, seeing far away a white thing stand,
Deemed her at first some maiden of the sand,
Such as to fishers sing a honied strain,
And leave them longing for their love in vain.
So, wishful to behold the sea-folk's bride,
He set the spurs into his horse's side.
But drawing nigher, he but saw her there,
Not moving much, her unbound yellow hair
Heavy with dew and washing of the sea;
And her wet raiment clinging amorously
About her body, in the wind's despite;
And in her arms her woe and her delight,
Spreading abroad the small hands helplessly
That on some day should still the battle's cry.
And furthermore he saw where by her side
Yet lay her ferry o'er the waters wide:
Then, though he knew not whence she might have come,
He doubted not the firm land was her home.

But when he came anigh, beholding him,
She fell a trembling in her every limb,
And kneeling to him held the young babe out,
And said: "O sir, if, as I have no doubt,
In this strange land thou art a king and lord,
Speak unto me some comfortable word.
"Born of a king who rules a lovely land,
I in my house that by the sea doth stand,
With all my girls, made merry on a day:
Now some of them upon the sands did play,
Dancing unto their fellows' minstrelsy;
And some it pleased upon sweet flowers to lie,
Ripe fruits around, and thence to look on them;
And some were fain to lift their kirtles' hem,
And through the shallows chase the fishes fleet;
But in this shallop would I have my seat
Alone, and holding this my little son,
And knowing not that my good-days were done.
"Now how it chanced, in sooth I cannot say,
But yet I think that one there was that day,
Who for some hidden cause did hate me sore,
Who cut the cord that bound me to the shore,
And soon amidst my helpless shrieks the boat,
Oarless and sailless, out to sea did float.
"But now that many a danger has been passed,
The gods have sent me to your land at last,
Alive, indeed, but such-like as you see,
Cold and drenched through with washing of the sea,
Half-clad, and kneeling on an unknown land,
And for a morsel holding out my hand."

Then said he, "Lady, fear not any more,
For thou art come unto no savage shore,
But here shall be a queen as erst at home:
And if thou askest whereto thou art come,
This is the isle Seriphos; and for me,
My name is Dictys, and right royally
My brother lives, the king of all the isle,
Him shalt thou see within a little while,

And doubtless he will give thee everything
That 'longs unto the daughter of a king.
"Meanwhile I bid thee in mine house to rest,
And there thy wearied body shall be dressed
In seemly raiment by my women slaves,
And thou shalt wash thee from the bitter waves,
And eat and drink, and sleep full easily
And on the morrow shalt thou come with me
And take King Polydectes by the hand,
Who in good peace rules o'er this quiet land."
Then on his horse he set the Queen, while he
Walked by the side thereof right soberly,
And half asleep, as slow they went along,
She laid her hand upon the war-horse strong,
While Dictys by her side Jove's offspring bore,
And thus they left the sea-beat yellow shore.
And as one dreaming to the house she came,
Where in the sun the brazen doors did flame;
And there she ate and drank as in a dream;
Dreamlike to her the scented bath did seem
After the icy sprinkling of the waves,
And like a dream the fair, slim women-slaves,
Who laid her in the soft bed, where she slept
Dreamless, until the horned white moon had stept
Over the fresh pine-scented hills again.
But when the sun next day drave forth his wain,
The damsel, clad in queen-like gold array,
With Dictys to the palace took her way;
And there by minstrels duly were they met,
Who brought them to the great hall, where was set
The King upon a royal throne of gold:
Black-bearded was he, thirty summers old,
Comely and strong, and seemed a king indeed;
Who, when he saw the minstrels thither lead
Fair Danaë, rose up to her, and said:
"Oh, welcome, lady! be no more afraid
That thou shalt lose thy state and dignity;
Yea, since a gem the gods have sent to me,
With plates of silver will I overlay
The casket that hath brought it on the way,
And set it in King Neptune's house to stand
Until the sea shall wash away the land.
"And for thyself a fair house shalt thou have
With all things needful, and right many a slave,
Both men and women; fair shall all things be
That thou mayest dwell here in felicity,
And that no care may wrinkle thy smooth brow.
"And for the child, when he is old enow
The priests of Pallas shall of him have care,
And thou shalt dwell hard by her temple fair;
But on this good day in mine hall abide,
And do me grace in sitting by my side."
Then mounted she the dais and sat, and then
Was she beheld of all the island-men
Who praised her much, and praised the sturdy child,
Who at their shouting made as if he smiled.

So passed the feast, and when the day had end
Unto her house did wearied Danaë wend,
That stood amid Minerva's olive-trees
Hidden away from moaning of the seas.

And there began fair Danaë's life again,
And quite forgotten was her ancient pain,
And peacefully did day succeed to day,
While fairer grew the well-loved child alway,
And strong and wise beyond his scanty years,
And in the island all his little peers
Held him for lord, whatso might be their worth,
And Perseus is his name from this time forth.

Lo, eighteen summers now have come and gone
Since on the beach fair Danaë stood alone
Holding her little son, nor yet was she
Less fair than when the hoarse unwilling sea
Moaned loud that Neptune drew him from her feet,
And the wind sighed upon her bosom sweet.
For in that long-past half-forgotten time,
While yet the world was young, and the sweet clime,
Golden and mild, no bitter storm-clouds bred,
Light lay the years upon the untroubled head,
And longer men lived then by many a year
Than in these days, when every week is dear.

Now on a day was held a royal feast
Whereon there should be slain full many a beast
Unto Minerva; thereto the King came,
And in his heart love lit a greedy flame
At sight of Danaë's arms stretched out in prayer
Unto the goddess, and her yellow hair,
Wreathed round with olive wreaths, that hung adown
Over the soft folds of her linen gown;
And when at last he took her by the hand
Speechless by her did Polydectes stand,
So was he with desire bewilderéd
At sight of all that wondrous white and red,
That peaceful face, wherein all past distress
Had melted into perfect loveliness.
So when that night he lay upon his bed,
Full many a thought he turned within his head
Of how he best might unto that attain,
Whose lack now filled him with such burning pain.
And at the first it seemed a little thing
For him who was a rich man and a king,
Either by gifts to win her, or to send
And fetch her thither, and perforce to end
Her widowhood; but then there came the thought,
"By force or gifts hither she might be brought,
And here might I get that for which I long,
Yet has she here a son both brave and strong,

Nor will he think it much to end my days
If he may get thereby the people's praise,
E'en if therewith he shortly needs must die;
Ah, verily, a purblind fool was I,
That when I first beheld that matchless face
I had no eyes to see her heavenly grace;
Then with few words might I have held her here
And kept her for mine own with little fear;
But now I have no will the lad to slay,
For he would be revenged some evil day,
Who now Jove's offspring do I think to be,
So dowered he is with might and majesty.
"Yet could I find perchance some fair pretence
Whereby with honour I might send him hence,
Nor have the youngling's blood upon my head,
Then might he be well-nigh as good as dead."
So pondering on his bed long time he lay,
Until the night began to mix with day,
And then he smiled and so to sleep turned round,
As though at last some sure way he had found.

And now it chanced to come round to the day,
When all the lords clad in their rich array
Unto the King should come for royal feast;
And there the custom was, that most and least
Should thither bear some present for the King,
As horse or sword, gold chain, fair cup, or ring.
Unto which feast was Perseus bidden now
Who giftless came, bare as the winter bough,
For little was his wealth in that strange land.
So there ashamed it was his lot to stand,
Before the guests were called to meat, and when
He sat amidst those royally-clad men
Little he spake for shame of his estate,
Not knowing yet his god-like birth and great.
So passed the feast, and when the full time came
To show the gifts, he waxed all red for shame:
For through the hall white horses were brought up,
And well-clad slaves, and many a dainty cup,
And many a gem well set in brooch or ring,
And laid before the daïs of the King.
But all alone of great folk of the land
With eyes cast down for rage did Perseus stand
Yet for his manhood thence he would not go.
Now some that secretly were bidden so,
Beholding him began to gibe and jeer,
Yet not too loud, held back perchance by fear,
And thus a murmur spread about the hall
As, each to each, men cast about the ball:
Which the King heard, or seemed to hear at last,
And round the noisy hall a look he cast,
And then beholding Perseus with a smile
He said, "Good friends, fair lords, be still awhile.
And say no ill about this giftless guest,
For truly not the worst, if scarce the best
I hold him, and forsooth so rich I live
Within this land, that I myself may give
Somewhat to him, nor yet take from him aught,
And when I bade him here this was my thought."
Then stretching out his arm did he take up
From off the board, a jewelled golden cup
And said, "O Perseus, come and sit by me,
And from my hand take this, that thou dost see,
And be my friend." Then Perseus drew anear,
And took the cup and said, "This shall be dear
Unto mine eyes while on the earth I live;
And yet a gift I in my turn may give,
When to this land comes bitter war, or when
Some enemy thou hast among great men;
Yea, sire, among these knights and lords I swear
To do whatso thou bidd'st me without fear."

Then the King smiled and said, "Yea, verily,
Then wilt thou give a noble gift to me,
Nor yet, forsooth, too early by a day;
To-morrow may'st thou be upon thy way.
"Far in the western sea a land there is
Desert and vast, and emptied of all bliss,
Where dwell the Gorgons wretchedly enow;
Two of them die not, one above her brow
And wretched head bears serpents, for the shame
That on an ill day fell upon her name,
When in Minerva's shrine great sin was wrought,
For thither by the Sea-god she was brought,
And in the maiden's house in love they mixed;
Who wrathful, in her once fair tresses fixed
That snaky brood, and shut her evermore
Within a land west of the Lybian shore.
"Now if a king could gain this snaky head
Full well for war were he apparelled,
Because no man may look thereon and live.
A great gift, therefore, Perseus, wouldst thou give
If thou shouldst bring this wonder unto me
And for the place, far in the western sea
It lies, I say, but nothing more I know,
Therefore I bid thee, to some wise man go
Who has been used this many a day to pore
O'er ancient books of long-forgotten lore."

Thus spoke the King, knowing the while full well
None but a god of that far land could tell.
But Perseus answered, "O my Lord, the King,
Thou settest me to win a dreadful thing,
Yet for thy bounty this gift will I give
Unto thine hands, if I should chance to live."
With that he turned, and silent, full of thought,
From out the hall he passed not noting aught,
And toward his home he went but soberly,
And thence went forth an ancient man to see
He hoped might tell him that he wished to know
And to what land it were the best to go.
But when he told the elder all the tale,
He shook his head, and said, "Nought will avail

My lore for this, nor dwells the man on earth
Whose wisdom for this thing will be of worth,
Yea, to this dreadful land no man shall win
Unless some god himself shall help therein;
Therefore, my son, I rede thee stay at home,
For thou shalt have full many a chance to roam
Seeking for something that all men love well,
Not for an unknown isle where monsters dwell."

Then forth again went Perseus soberly
And walked along the border of the sea,
Upon the yellow sands where first he came
That time when he was deemed his mother's shame.
And now was it the first hour of the night,
Therefore within the west a yellow light
Yet shone, though risen was the horned moon,
Whose lonely cold grey beams would quench it soon,
Though now her light was shining doubtfully
On the wet sands, for low down was the sea
But rising, and the salt-sea wind blew strong
And drave the hurrying breakers swift along.
So there walked Perseus thinking many a thing
About those last words of the wily king,
And as he went at last he came upon
An ancient woman, who said, "Fair, my son,
What dost thou wandering here in the cold night?
When in the King's hall glance from shade to light
The golden sandals of the dancing girls,
And in the gold cups set with gems and pearls
The wine shines fair that glads the heart of man;
What dost thou wandering 'neath the moonlight wan?"

"This have I done," said he, "as one should swear
To make the vine bear bunches twice a year,
For I have sworn the Gorgon's head to bring
A worthy gift unto our island King,
When neither I, nor any man can tell
In what far land apart from men they dwell.
Some god alone can help me in my need;
And yet unless somehow I do the deed
An exile I must be from this fair land,
Nor with my peers shall I have heart to stand."
Grim in the moonlight smiled the aged crone,
And said, "If living there thou com'st, alone
Of all men yet, what thinkest thou to do?
Then verily thy journey shalt thou rue,
For whoso looks upon that face meets death,
That in his sick heart freezes up his breath
Until he has the semblance of a stone."
But Perseus answered straightly to the crone,
"O Mother, if the gods but give me grace
To come anigh that fair and dreadful face,
Well may they give me grace enough also
Their enemy and mine to lay alow."

Now as he spake, the white moon risen high
Burst from a cloud, and shone out gloriously,
And down the sands her path of silver shone,
And lighted full upon that ancient crone;
And there a marvel Perseus saw indeed,
Because in face, in figure, and in weed,
She wholly changed before his wondering eyes.
Now tall and straight her figure did arise,
That erst seemed bent with weight of many a year,
And on her head a helmet shone out clear
For the rent clout that held the grizzled head:
With a fair breastplate was she furnished,
From whence a hauberk to her knees fell down;
And underneath, a perfumed linen gown,
O'erwrought with many-coloured Indian silk,
Fell to her sandall'd feet, as white as milk.
Grey-eyed she was, like amber shone her hair,
Aloft she held her right arm round and bare,
Whose hand upheld a spear-shaft nigh the steel.

Unwonted trembling fear did Perseus feel
When he beheld before him Pallas stand,
And with bowed head he stood, and outstretched hand:
But she smiled on him softly, and she said,
"Hold up again, O Perseus, thy fair head,
Because thou art indeed my father's son,
And in this quest that now thou goest upon
Thou shalt not fail: I swear it by my head,
And that black water all immortals dread.
"Look now before my feet, and thou shalt see
Four helpful things the high gods lend to thee,
Not willing thou shouldst journey forth in vain:
Hermes himself, the many-eyed one's bane,
Gives these two-winged shoes, to carry thee
Tireless on high o'er every land and sea;
This cap is his whose chariot caught away
The maid of Enna from her gentle play;
And if thou art hard-pressed of any one
Set this on thee, and so be seen of none:
The halting god was craftsman of this blade;
No better shone, when, making heaven afraid,
The giants round our golden houses cried,
For neither brass nor steel its edge can bide,
Or flinty rocks or gleaming adamant:
With these, indeed, but one thing dost thou want,
And that I give thee; little need'st thou reck
Of those grey hopeless eyes, if round thy neck
Thou hang'st this shield, that, hanging once on mine,
In the grim giant's hopeless eyes did shine.
"And now be strong, and fly forth with good heart
Far northward, till thou seest the ice-walls part
The weary sea from snow-clad lands and wan,
Untrodden yet by any son of man.

There dwell the Gorgons' ancient sisters three
Men call the Graiæ, who make shift to see
With one eye, which they pass from hand to hand.
Now make thyself unseen in this white land
And snatch the eye, while crooning songs they sit,
From hand to withered hand still passing it;
And let them buy it back by telling thee
How thou shalt find within the western sea
The unknown country where their sisters dwell.
"Which thing unto thee I myself would tell,
But when with many a curse I set them there,
I in my wrath by a great oath did swear
I would not name again the country grey
Wherein they dwell, with little light of day.
"Good speed, O Perseus; make no tarrying,
But straightly set thyself to do this thing."

Now as his ears yet rung with words like these,
And on the sand he sank upon his knees
Before the goddess, there he knelt alone
As in a dream; but still the white moon shone
Upon the sword, the shield, and cap and shoes,
Which half afeard he was at first to use,
Until the goddess gave him heart at last,
And his own gear in haste aside he cast,
And armed himself in that wild, lonely place:
Then turning round, northward he set his face,
And rose aloft and o'er the lands 'gan fly,
Betwixt the green earth and the windy sky.
Young was the night when first he left the sands
Of small Seriphos, but right many lands
Before the moon was down his winged feet
Had borne him over, tireless, strong, and fleet.
Then in the starlight, black beneath him lay
The German forests, where the wild swine play,
Fearless of what Diana's maids may do,
Who ever have more will to wander through
The warm and grassy woods of Thessaly,
Or in Sicilian orange-gardens lie.
But ere the hot sun on his arms 'gan shine
He had passed o'er the Danube and the Rhine,
And heard the faint sound of the northern sea;
But ever northward flew untiringly,
Till Thule lay beneath his feet at last.
Then o'er its desert icy hills he passed,
And on beneath a feeble sun he flew,
Till, rising like a wall, the cliffs he knew
That Pallas told him of: the sun was high,
But on the bleak ice shone but wretchedly;
Pale blue the great mass was, and cold enow;
Grey tattered moss hung from its jagged brow,
No wind was there at all, though ever beat
The leaden tideless sea against its feet.

Then lighted Perseus on that dreary land.
And when on the white plain his feet did stand
He saw no sign of either beast or man,
Except that near by rose a palace wan,
Built of some metal that he could not name.
Thither he went, and to a great door came
That stood wide open; so without a word
He entered in, and drew his deadly sword,
Though neither sword or man might one behold
More than folk see their death ere they grow old.
So having entered, through a cloister grey
With cautious steps and slow he took his way,
At end whereof he found a mighty hall;
Where, bare of hangings, a white marble wall
And milk-white pillars held the roof aloft,
And nothing was therein of fair or soft;
And at one end, upon a daïs high,
There sat the crones that had the single eye,
Clad in blue sweeping cloak and snow-white gown;
While o'er their backs their straight white hair hung down
In long thin locks; dreadful their faces were
Carved all about with wrinkles of despair;
And as they sat they crooned a dreary song,
Complaining that their lives should last so long,
In that sad place that no one came anear,
In that wan place desert of hope and fear;
And singing, still they rocked their bodies bent,
And ever each to each the eye they sent.

Awhile stood Perseus gazing on the three
Then sheathed his sword, and toward them warily
He went, and from the last one snatched the eye,
Who, feeling it gone from her, with a cry
Sprung up and said, "O sisters, he is here
That we were warned so long ago to fear,
And verily he has the eye of me."
Then those three, thinking they no more should see.
What feeble light the sun could show them there,
And that of all joys now their life was bare,
Began a wailing and lamenting sore
That they were worse than ever heretofore.
Then Perseus cried, "Unseen am I indeed,
But yet a mortal man, who have a need
Your wisdom can make good, if so ye will;
Now neither do I wish you any ill,
Nor this your treasure will I keep from you
If ye will tell me what I needs must do
To gain, upon the earth or under it,
The dreary country where your sisters sit:
Of whom, as wise men say, the one is fair
As any goddess, but with snaky hair
And body that shall perish on some day,
While the two others ancient are, and grey
As ye be, but shall see the whole world die."
Then said they, "Rash man, give us back the eye

Or rue this day, for wretched as we are,
Beholding not fair peace or godlike war,
Or any of the deeds of men at all,
Yet are we strong, and on thy head shall fall
Our heavy curses, and but dismally
Thy life shall pass until thou com'st to die."
"Make no delay," he said, "to do this thing,
Or this your cherished sight I soon shall fling
Into the sea, or burn it up with fire."
"What else, what else, but this wilt thou desire?"
They said, "Wilt thou have long youth at our hands?
Or wilt thou be the king of lovely lands?
Or store up wealth to lead thy life in mirth?
Or wilt thou have the beauty of the earth
With all her kindness for thy very own?
Choose what thou wilt except this thing alone."
"Nay," said he, "for nought else I left my home;
For this sole knowledge hither am I come,
Not all unholpen of the gods above;
Nor yet shall words my steadfast purpose move."
Then with that last word did he hold his peace,
And they no less from wailing words did cease,
Hoping that in that silence he might think
Of their dread words and from the evils shrink
Wherewith they threatened him; but in his heart
Most godlike courage fit for such a part
The white-armed goddess of the loom had set,
Nor in that land her help did he forget.

Withal, when many an hour had now gone by,
Together did the awesome sisters cry,
"O man! O man! hear that which thou would'st know,
And with thy knowledge let the dread curse go,
Which us hath cursed most of all those who dwell
Upon this wretched fire-concealing shell.
Slave of the cruel gods! go, get ye hence,
And storing deeds for fruitless penitence,
Go east, as though in Scythia were thine home,
But when unto the wind-beat seas ye come
Stop short, and turn round to the south again
Until ye reach the western land of Spain;
Then o'er the straits ye soon shall come to be
Betwixt the ocean and the inner sea,
Thenceforth go westward even as thou mayst
Until ye find a dark land long laid waste,
Where green cliffs rise from out an inky sea,
But no green leaf may grow on bush or tree.
No sun makes day there, no moon lighteth night,
The long years there must pass in grey twilight;
There dwell our sisters, walking dismally,
Between the dull-brown caverns and the sea.

"Tool in the hand of god! do there thy might!
Nor fall like us, nor strive for peace and right;
But give our own unto us and be gone,
And leave us to our misery all alone."

Then straight he put the eye into the hand
Of her that spoke, and turned from that white land,
Leaving them singing their grim song again.
But flying forth he came at last to Spain,
And so unto the southern end of it,
And then with restless wings due west did flit.
For many a day across the sea he flew,
That lay beneath him clear enough and blue,
Until at last rose such a thick grey mist,
That of what lay beneath him nought he wist;
But still through this he flew a night and day
Hearkening the washing of the watery way,
Unseen: but when, at ending of the night,
The mist was gone and grey sea came in sight,
He thought that he had reached another world;
This way and that the leaden seas were hurled,
Moved by no wind, but by some unseen power;
Twilight it was, and still his feet dropped lower,
As through the thickening, dim hot air he passed,
Until he feared to reach the sea at last.
But even as his feet dragged in the sea,
He, praying to the goddess fervently,
Felt her good help, for soon he rose again
Three fathoms up, and flew with lessened pain;
And looking through the dimness could behold
The wretched land whereof the sisters told.
And soon could see how down the green cliffs fell
A yellow stream, that from some inland well
Arose, and through the land ran sluggishly,
Until it poured with dull plash in the sea
Like molten lead; and nigher as he came
He saw great birds, whose kind he could not name,
That whirling noiselessly about did seem
To seek a prey within that leaden stream;
And drawing nigher yet, at last he saw
That many of them held, with beak or claw,
Great snakes they tore still flying through the air.
Then making for the cliff and lighting there
He saw, indeed, that tawny stream and dull
Of intertwining writhen snakes was full,
So, with a shudder, thence he turned away,
And through the untrodden land he took his way.
Now cave-pierced rocks there rose up everywhere,
And gaunt old trees, of leaves and fruit all bare;
And midst this wretchedness a mighty hall,
Whose great stones made a black and shining wall
The doors were open, and thence came a cry
Of one in anguish wailing bitterly;
Then o'er its threshold passed the son of Jove,
Well shielded by the grey-eyed Maiden's love.
Now there he saw two women bent and old,
Like to those three that north he did behold,

There were they, sitting well-nigh motionless,
Their eyes grown stony with their long distress,
Staring at nought, and still no sound they made,
And on their knees their wrinkled hands were laid.
But a third woman paced about the hall,
And ever turned her head from wall to wall
And moaned aloud, and shrieked in her despair;
Because the golden tresses of her hair
Were moved by writhing snakes from side to side,
That in their writhing oftentimes would glide
On to her breast, or shuddering shoulders white;
Or, falling down, the hideous things would light
Upon her feet, and crawling thence would twine
Their slimy folds about her ankles fine.
But in a thin red garment was she clad,
And round her waist a jewelled band she had,
The gift of Neptune on the fatal day
When fate her happiness first put away.
So there awhile unseen did Perseus stand,
With softening heart, and doubtful trembling hand
Laid on his sword-hilt, muttering, "Would that she
Had never turned her woeful face to me."
But therewith Pallas smote him with this thought,
"Does she desire to live, who has been brought
Into such utter woe and misery,
Wherefrom no god or man can set her free,
Since Pallas' dreadful vow shall bind her fast,
Till earth and heaven are gone, and all is past?
—And yet, would God the thing were at an end."
Then with that word, he saw her stop and rend
The raiment from her tender breast and soft,
And with a great cry lift her arms aloft;
Then on her breast her head sank, as she said,
"O ye, be merciful, and strike me dead!
How many an one cries unto you to live,
Which gift ye find no little thing to give,
O give it now to such, and unto me,
That other gift from which all people flee!
"O was it not enough to take away
The flowery meadows and the light of day?
Or not enough to take away from me
The once-loved faces that I used to see;
To take away sweet sounds and melodies,
The song of birds, the rustle of the trees;
To make the prattle of the children cease,
And wrap my soul in shadowy hollow peace,
Devoid of longing? Ah, no, not for me!
For those who die your friends this rest shall be;
For me no rest from shame and sore distress,
For me no moment of forgetfulness;
For me a soul that still might love and hate,
Shut in this fearful land and desolate,
Changed by mine eyes to horror and to stone;
For me perpetual anguish all alone,
Midst many a tormenting misery,
Because I know not if I e'er shall die.

"And yet, and yet, thee will I pray unto,
Thou dweller in the shifting halls of blue,
Fathoms beneath the treacherous bridge of lands.
Call now to mind that day upon the sands,
Hard by the house of Pallas white and cold,
Where hidden in some wave thou didst behold
This body, fearless of the cold grey sea,
And dowered as yet with fresh virginity.
"How many things thou promisedst me then!
Who among all the daughters of great men
Should be like me? what sweet and happy life!
What peace, if all the world should be at strife,
Thou promisedst me then! Lay all aside,
And give unto the great Earth-Shaker's bride
That which the wretch shut up in prison drear,
Deprived of all, yet ceases not to fear;
That which all men fear more than all distress,
The rest of death, and dull forgetfulness."

Her constant woeful prayer was heard at last,
For now behind her unseen Perseus passed,
And silently whirled the great sword around;
And when it fell, she fell upon the ground,
And felt no more of all her bitter pain.
But from their seats rose up with curses vain
The two immortals when they saw her fall
Headless upon the floor, and loud 'gan call
On those that came not, because far away
Their friends and kindred were upon that day.
Then to and fro about the hall they ran
To find the slayer, were he god or man,
And when unseen from out the place he drew,
Upon the unhappy corpse, with wails, they threw
Their wretched and immortal bodies old:
But when the one the other did behold,
Alive and hideous there before her eyes,
Such anguish for the past time would arise
Within their hearts, that the lone hall would ring
With dreadful shrieks of many an impious thing.
Yet of their woe but little Perseus knew,
As with a stout heart south-east still he flew.

Now at his side a wallet Perseus bore,
With threads of yellow gold embroidered o'er,
Shuddering, therein he laid the fearful head,
Lest he unwitting yet might join the dead,
Or those he loved by sight of it be slain.
But strong fate led him to the Lybian plain,
Where, at the ending of a sultry day,
A palace huge and fair beneath him lay,
Whose roofs with silver plates were covered o'er;
Then lighting down by its enormous door,
He heard unmeasured sounds of revelry,
And thought, "A fair place this will be for me,

Who lack both food and drink, and rest this night."
So turning to the ruddy flood of light,
Up the huge steps he toiled unto the hall;
But even as his eager foot did fall
Upon the threshold, such a mocking shout
Rang in his ears as Etna sendeth out
When, at the day's end, round the stithy cold
The Cyclops some unmeasured banquet hold.
And monstrous men could he see sitting there,
Burnt by the sun, with length of straight black hair,
And taller far than men are wont to be;
And at a gold-strewn daïs could he see
A mighty King, a fearful man to face,
Brown-skinned and black-haired, of the giants' race,
Who seeing him, with thundering voice 'gan call,
"O Stranger, come forthwith into the hall,
Atlas would see thee!" Forth stood Perseus then,
And going 'twixt the rows of uncouth men
Seemed but a pigmy; but his heart was great,
And vain is might against the stroke of fate.
Then the King cried, "Who art thou, little one?
Surely in thy land weak must be the sun
If there are bred such tender folk as thou:
May the gods grant such men are few enow!
Art thou a king's son?" Loud he laughed withal,
And shouts of laughter rang throughout the hall,
Like clattering thunder on a July night.
But Perseus quailed not. "Little were my might,"
He said, "if helpless on the earth I were;
But to the equal gods my life is dear,
And certes victory over Jove's own son
By earthly men shall not be lightly won."
So spake he, moving inward from the door,
But louder laughed the black King than before,
And all his people shouted at his beck;
Therewith he cried, "Break now this Prince's neck,
And take him forth and hang him up straightway
Before my door, that henceforth from this day
Pigmies and jesters may take better heed,
Lest at our hands they gain a liar's meed."
Then started up two huge men from the board,
And Perseus, seeing them come, half drew his sword,
Looking this way and that; but in a while,
Upon his wallet with a deadly smile
He set his hand, and forth the head he drew,
Dead, white midst golden hair, where serpents blue
Yet dangled dead; and ere they stooped to take
His outstretched arms, before them he did shake
The dreadful thing: then stopped they suddenly,
Stone dead, without a wound or any cry.
Then toward the King he held aloft the head,
And as he stiffened cried at him, and said,
"O King! when such a gift I bring to thee,
Wilt thou be dumb and neither hear nor see?
Listen how sing thy men, and in thy hall
How swift the merry dancers' feet do fall!"
For now these, thinking him some god to be,
Cried in their fear, and made great haste to flee,
Crowding about the great doors of the hall,
Until not one was left of great or small,
But the dead king, and those that there had died.—
—Lo, in such way Medusa's head was tried!
But when the living giant-folk were gone,
And with the dead men there he stood alone,
He turned him to the food that thereby lay,
And ate and drank with none to say him nay;
And on the floor at last he laid him down,
Midst heaps of unknown tawny skins and brown.
There all the night in dreamless sleep he lay,
But rose again at the first streak of day,
And looking round about rejoiced to see
The uncouth image of his enemy,
Silent for ever, with wide mouth agape
E'en as he died; and thought, "Who now shall 'scape
When I am angry, while this gift I have?
How well my needy lovers I may save
While this dread thing still hangeth by my side!"
Then out he passed: a plain burnt up, and wide,
He saw before him, bare of any trees,
And much he longed for the green dashing seas,
And merry winds of the sweet island shore,
Fain of the gull's cry, for the lion's roar.
Yet, glad at heart, he lifted up his feet
From the parched earth, and soon the air did beat,
Going north-east, and flew forth all the day,
And when the night fell, still was on the way;
And many a sandy plain did he pass o'er,
And many a dry much-trodden river shore,
Where thick the thirsty beasts stood in the night.
The stealthy leopard saw him with affright,
As whining from the thicket it crept out;
The lion drew back at his sudden shout
From off the carcass of some slaughtered beast;
And the thin jackals waiting for the feast
Stinted their hungry howls as he passed by;
And black men sleeping, as he came anigh
Dreamed ugly dreams, and reached their hands to seize
The spear or sword that lay across their knees.

So at the last the sea before him lay,
But not for that did he make any stay,
But flew on till the night began to wane,
And the grey sea was blue and green again;
Until the sunlight on his wings shone fair,
And turned to red the gold locks of his hair.
Then in a little while he saw no land,
But all was heaving sea on every hand,

Driven this way and that way by the wind.
Still fast he flew, thinking some coast to find,
And so, about the middle of the day,
Far to the east a land before him lay,
And when unto it he was come anigh
He saw the sea beat on black cliffs and high,
With green grass growing on the tops of them,
Binding them round as gold a garment's hem.
Then slowly alongside thereof he flew
If haply by some sign the land he knew,
Until a ness he reached, whereon there stood
A tower new-built of mighty beams of wood;
So nigh he came that, unseen, he could see
Pale haggard faces peering anxiously
From out its well-barred windows that looked forth
Into a bay that lay upon the north;
But inland over moveless waves of down
Shone the white walls of some great royal town.
Now underneath the scarped cliffs of the bay
From horn to horn a belt of sand there lay
Fast lessening as the flood-tide swallowed it,
There all about did the sea-swallows flit,
And from the black rocks yellow hawks flew down,
And cormorants fished amidst the sea-weed brown,
Or on the low rocks nigh unto the sea,
While over all the fresh wind merrily
Blew from the deep, and o'er the pale blue sky
Thin clouds were stretched the way the wind went by;
And forward did the mighty waters press
As though they loved the green earth's stedfastness.
Nought slept, but everything was bright and fair
Beneath the bright sun and the noonday air.
Now hovering there, he seemed to hear a sound
Unlike the sea-bird's cry, and, looking round,
He saw a figure standing motionless
Beneath the cliff, midway 'twixt ness and ness,
And as the wind lulled, heard that cry again,
That sounded like the wail of one in pain;
Wondering thereat, and seeking marvels new
He lighted down, and toward the place he drew,
And made invisible by Pallas' aid,
He came within the scarped cliff's purple shade,
And found a woman standing lonely there,
Naked, except for tresses of her hair
That o'er her white limbs by the breeze were wound,
And brazen chains her weary arms that bound
Unto the sea-beat overhanging rock,
As though her golden-crownéd head to mock.
But nigh her feet upon the sand there lay
Rich raiment that had covered her that day,
Worthy to be the ransom of a king,
Unworthy round such loveliness to cling.

Alas, alas! no bridal play this was,
The tremors that throughout her limbs did pass,
Her restless eyes, the catching of her breath,
Were but the work of the cold hand of death,
She waited for, midst untold miseries;
As, now with head cast back, and close-shut eyes,
She wailed aloud, and now all spent with woe
Stared out across the rising sea, as though
She deemed each minute brought the end anigh
For which in her despair she needs must cry.

Then unseen Perseus stole anigh the maid,
And love upon his heart a soft hand laid,
And tender pity rent it for her pain;
Nor yet an eager cry could he refrain,
As now, transformed by that piteous sight,
Grown like unto a god for pride and might,
Down on the sand the mystic cap he cast
And stood before her with flushed face at last,
And grey eyes glittering with his great desire
Beneath his hair, that like a harmless fire
Blown by the wind shone in her hopeless eyes.
But she, all rigid with her first surprise,
Ceasing her wailing as she heard his cry,
Stared at him, dumb with fear and misery,
Shrunk closer yet unto the rocky place
And writhed her bound hands as to hide her face;
But sudden love his heart did so constrain,
With open mouth he strove to speak in vain
And from his heart the hot tears 'gan to rise;
But she midst fear beheld his kind grey eyes,
And then, as hope came glimmering through her dread,
In a weak voice he scarce could hear, she said,
"O Death! if thou hast risen from the sea,
Sent by the gods to end this misery,
I thank them that thou comest in this form,
Who rather thought to see a hideous worm
Come trailing up the sands from out the deep,
Or suddenly swing over from the steep
To lap me in his folds, and bone by bone
Crush all my body: come then, with no moan,
Will I make ready now to leave the light.
"But yet—thy face is wonderful and bright;
Art thou a god? Ah, then be kind to me!
Is there no valley far off from the sea
Where I may live alone, afar from strife,
Nor anger any god with my poor life?
Or do the gods delight in misery
And art thou come to mock me ere I die?
Alas, must they be pitiless, when they
Fear not the hopeless slayer of the day!
Speak, speak! what meanest thou by that sad smile?
"O, if the gods could be but men awhile
And learn such fearful things unspeakable
As I have learned this morn, what man can tell
What golden age might wrap the world again—
Ah, dost thou love me, is my speech not vain?

Did not my beauty perish on this morn?
Dost thou not kiss me now for very scorn?
Alas, my shame, I cannot flee from thee!
Alas, my sin! no green-stemmed laurel tree
Shall mock thy grasp, no misty mountain stream
Shall wake thee shuddering from a lovely dream,
No helping god shall hear, but thou alone!—
Help me, I faint! I see not! art thou gone?
Alas! thy lips were warm upon my brow,
What good deed will it be to leave me now!
"Oh, yet I feel thy kind and tender hand
On my chained wrist, and thou wilt find some land
Where I may live a little, free from fear.
"And yet, and yet, if thou hast sought me here
Being but a man, no manly thing it is.
Nor hope thou from henceforth to live in bliss,
If here thou wrongest me, who am but dead."
Then as she might she hung adown her head,
Her bosom heaved with sobs, and from her eyes
Long dried amidst those hopeless miseries
Unchecked the salt tears o'er her bosom ran
As love and shame their varying strife began.
But overwhelmed with pity, mad with love,
Stammering, nigh weeping spoke the son of Jove,—
"Alas, what land is this, where such as thou
Are thus tormented? look upon me now,
And cease thy fear! no evil man am I,
No cruel god to mock thy misery;
But the gods help me, and their unmoved will
Has sent me here to save thee from some ill,
I know not what; to give thee rest from this;
And unto me unutterable bliss,
If from a man thou takest not away
The gift thou gavest to a god to-day;
But I may be a very god to thee,
Because the gods are helpful unto me,
Nor would I fear them aught if thou wert nigh,
Since unto each it happeneth once to die.
"Speak not, sweet maid, till I have loosed thine hands
From out the grasp of these unworthy bands."
So straight, and ere her lips could frame a word,
From out its sheath he drew the gleaming sword,
And while she shut her dazzled eyes for fear
To see the glittering marvel draw anear,
Unto her side her weary arms fell freed;
Then must she shrink away, for now indeed
With rest and hope and growing love there came
Remembrance of her helplessness and shame,
Weeping she said, "My fate is but to die,
Forget the wild words of my misery,
Take a poor maiden's thanks, and leave this place,
Nor for thy pity die before my face,
As verily thou wilt if thou stay'st here;
Because, however free thou art from fear,
What hopest thou against this beast to do,
My death, and thine unconquerable foe?
When all a kingdom's strength has had no hope
With this strange horror, God-endowed, to cope,
But deemed it good to give up one poor maid
Unto his wrath, who makes the world afraid."
"Nay," said he, "but thy fate shall be my fate,
And on these sands thy bane will I await,
Though I know nought of all his mightiness;
For scarcely yet a man, I none the less
Such things have done as make me now a name,
Nor can I live a loveless life of shame,
Or leave thee now, this day's most god-like gift,
Into some unknown mortal pain to drift."

She, hurrying as he spoke, with trembling hands
Had lifted up her raiment from the sands,
And yet therewith she was not well arrayed,
Before she turned round, ghastly white, and said,
"Look seaward and behold my death draw nigh!
Not thine—not thine—but kiss me ere I die;
Alas! how many things I had to tell,
For certainly I should have loved thee well."
He came to her and kissed her as she sank
Into his arms, and from the horror shrank,
Clinging to him, scarce knowing he was there;
But through the drifting wonder of her hair,
Amidst his pity, he beheld the sea,
And saw a huge wave rising mightily
Above the smaller breakers of the shore,
Which in its green breast for a minute bore
A nameless horror, that it cast aland,
And left, a huge mass on the oozing sand,
That scarcely seemed a living thing to be,
Until at last those twain it seemed to see,
And gathering up its strange limbs, towards them passed.
And therewithal a dismal trumpet-blast
Rang from the tower, and from the distant town
The winds in answer brought loud wails adown.
Then Perseus gently put the maid from him,
Who sank down shivering in her every limb,
Silent despite herself for fear and woe,
As down the beach he ran to meet the foe.
But he, beholding Jove's son drawing near,
A great black fold against him did uprear,
Maned with grey tufts of hair, as some old tree
Hung round with moss, in lands where vapours be;
From his bare skull his red eyes glowed like flame,
And from his open mouth a sound there came,
Strident and hideous, that still louder grew
As that rare sight of one in arms he knew:
But godlike, fearless, burning with desire,
The adamant jaws and lidless eyes of fire
Did Perseus mock, and lightly leapt aside
As forward did the torture-chamber glide
Of his huge head, and ere the beast could turn,
One moment bright did blue-edged Herpe burn,

The next was quenched in the black flow of blood;
Then in confusèd folds the hero stood,
His bright face shadowed by the jaws of death,
His hair blown backward by the poisonous breath;
But all that passed, like lightning-lighted street
In the dark night, as the blue blade did meet
The wrinkled neck, and with no faltering stroke,
Like a god's hand the fell enchantment broke,
And then again in place of crash and roar,
He heard the shallow breakers on the shore,
And o'er his head the sea-gull's plaintive cry,
Careless as gods for who might live or die.

Then Perseus from the slimy loathsome coil
Drew out his feet, and then with little toil
Smote off the head, the terror of the lands,
And, dragging it along, went up the sands,
Shouting aloud for joy, "Arise, arise,
O thou whose name I know not! Ope thine eyes
To see the gift, that I, first seen to-day,
Am hastening now before thy feet to lay!
Look up, look up! What shall thy sweet face be,
That I have seen amidst such misery,
When thou at last beginnest to rejoice?"
Slowly she rose, her burdened heart found voice
In sobs and murmurs inarticulate,
And clean forgetting all the sport of fate,
She scarce could think that she should ever die,
As locked in fearless, loving, straight embrace,
They made a heaven of that lone sandy place.
Then on a rock smoothed by the washing sea
They sat, and eyed each other lovingly.
And few words at the first the maiden said,
So wrapped she was in all the goodlihead
Of her new life made doubly happy now:
For her alone the sea-breeze seemed to blow,
For her in music did the white surf fall,
For her alone the wheeling birds did call
Over the shallows, and the sky for her
Was set with white clouds, far away and clear;
E'en as her love, this strong and lovely one
Who held her hand, was but for her alone.
But after loving silence for a while,
She, turning round to him her heavenly smile,
Said, "Tell me, O my love, what name is thine,
What mother brought thee forth so nigh divine,
Whence art thou come to take away my shame?"
Then said he, "Fair love, Perseus is my name,
Not known of men, though that may come to be;
And her that bore me men call Danaë,
And tales of my begetting people tell
And call my father, Jove: but it befell
Unto my mother, when I first was born,
That she, cast out upon the sea, forlorn
Of help of men, unto Seriphos came;
And there she dwells as now, not gathering shame,
But called a Queen; and thence I come indeed,
Sent by the gods to help thee in thy need."
Then he began and told her everything
Down to the slaying of the monstrous king,
She listening to him meanwhile, glad at heart
That he had played so fair and great a part.
But all being told, she said, "This salt pool nigh
Left by the tide, now mirrors well the sky,
So smooth it is, and now I stand anear
Canst thou not see my foolish visage clear,
Yea, e'en the little gems upon my hands?
May I not see this marvel of the lands
So mirrored, and yet live—make no delay,
The sea is pouring fast into the bay,
And we must soon be gone."
"Look down," he said,
"And take good heed thou turnest not thine head."
Then gazing down, with shuddering dread and awe,
Over her imaged shoulder, soon she saw
The head rise up, so beautiful and dread,
That, white and ghastly, yet seemed scarcely dead
Beside the image of her own fair face,
As, daring not to move from off the place,
But trembling sore, she cried, "Enough, O love!
What man shall doubt thou art the son of Jove;
I think thou wilt not die:" then with her hand
She hid her eyes, and trembling did she stand
Until she felt his lips upon her cheek;
Then turning round, with anxious eyes and meek,
She gazed upon him, and some doubtful thought
Up to her brow the tender colour brought,
And sinking somewhat down her golden head,
Stammering a little now these words she said,—
"O godlike man, thou dost not ask my name,
Or why folk gave me up to death and shame;
Dost thou not dread I am some sorceress,
Whose evil deeds well earned me that distress?"
"Tell me thy name," he said; "yet as for thee
I deem that thou wert bound beside the sea,
Because the gods would have the dearest thing
Which thy land held for its own ransoming."
She said, "O love, the sea is rising fast,
And time it is that we henceforth were past;
The only path that leadeth to the down
Is far, and thence a good way is the town;
Wend we, and on our journey will I tell
How all these things, now come to nought, befell."
"Lead on," he said, and lifted from the sand
The monster's head; and therewith, hand in hand,
Together underneath the cliffs they went,
The while she told her tale to this intent.

"This is the Syrian land, this town anigh
Is Joppa, and Andromeda am I,
Daughter of him who holds the sceptre there,
King Cepheus, and Cassiope the fair.

"She, smit by cruel madness, brought ill fate
Upon the land to make it desolate;
For by the place whence thou deliveredst me,
An altar to the daughters of the sea
Erewhile there stood, and we in solemn wise,
Unto the maids were wont to sacrifice,
And give them gifts of honey, oil, and wine,
That we might have the love of folk divine;
And so it chanced that on a certain day,
When from that place the sea was ebbed away,
Upon the firm sands I and many a maid
About that altar went, while the flutes played
Such notes as sea-folk love; and as we went
Upon the wind rich incense-clouds we sent
About the hallowed stone, whereon there lay
Fruits of the earth for them to bear away;
Thus did we maids, as we were wont to do,
And watching us, as was their wont also,
Our mothers stood, my own amidst the rest.
"But ere the rites were done, as one possessed
She cried aloud, 'Alas, what do we now,
Such honour unto unseen folk to show!
To spend our goods, our labour, and our lives,
In serving these the careless sea-wind drives
Hither and thither through the booming seas;
While thou Andromeda art queen of these,
And in thy limbs such lovely godhead moves,
That thou shalt be new Mother of the Loves;
Thou shalt not die! Go, child, and sit alone,
And take our homage on thy golden throne;
And I that bore thee will but be thy slave,
Nor shall another any worship have.'
"Trembling awhile we stood with heads downcast,
To hear those words, then from the beach we passed;
And sick at heart each went unto her home
Expecting when the fearful death should come,
Like those of Thebes, who, smit by arrows, fell
Before the feet of her who loved too well.
"And yet stayed not my mother's madness there;
She caused men make a silver image fair
Of me unhappy, round the base she writ
'*Fairest of all*,' and bade men carry it,
With flowers and music, down unto the sea,
Who on the altar fixed it solidly
Against the beating of the winds and waves.
"But we, expecting now no quiet graves,
Trembled at every murmur of the night,
And if a cloud should hide the noon sun bright
Grew faint with terror; yet the days went by
Harmless above our great iniquity,
Until one wretched morn I woke to hear,
Down in the street loud wails and cries of fear,
And my heart died within me, nor durst I
Ask for the reason of that bitter cry,
Though soon I knew it—nigh unto the sea
Were gathered folk for some festivity;
When, at the happiest moment of their feast,
Forth from the deep there came a fearful beast
No man could name, who quickly snatched away
Their fairest maid, and with small pain did slay
Such men as there in arms before him stood;
For unto him was steel as rotten wood,
And darts as straw—nor grew the story old,
Day after day e'en such a tale was told.
—Kiss me, my love! I grow afraid again;
Kiss me amid the memory of my pain.
Draw me to thee, that I thine arms may feel,
A better help than triple brass or steel!
"Alas, love! folk began to look on me
With angry eyes, and mutter gloomily,
As pale and trembling through the streets I passed;
And from the heavy thunder-cloud, at last
The dreadful lightning quivered through the air:
For on a day the people filled the square
With arms and tumult, and my name I heard,
But heard no more; for, shuddering and afeard,
Unto my far-off quiet bower I fled,
And from that moment deemed myself but dead.
How the time passed I know not, what they did
I know not now; for like a quail half hid,
When the hawk's pinions shade the sun from him,
Crouching adown, I felt my life wax dim.
"The gods have made us mighty certainly
That we can bear such things and yet not die.
This morn—Ah, love, and was it yet this year,
Wherein thou camest to me, kind and dear?—
This morn they brought me forth, they did on me
This mocking raiment bright with bravery;
They mocked my head with gold, with gems my feet,
My heart with lovely songs and music sweet.
Thou wouldst have wept to see me led along
Amidst that dreary pomp with flowers and song,
But if folk wept, how could I note it then;
Most vain to me were grown all ways of men.
"They brought me to mine image on the sands,
They took it down, they bore it in their hands
To deck mine empty tomb, I think, and then—
O cruel is the fearfulness of men,
Striving a little while to 'scape death's pain!—
My naked body they spared not to chain,
Lest I should 'scape the death from which they fled,
Then left me there alone and shamed—and dead—
While to his home each went again, to live
Such vain forgetful life as fate might give.
"O love, to think that love can pass away,
That, soon or late, to us shall come a day
When this shall be forgotten! e'en this kiss
That makes us now forget the high God's bliss,

And sons of men with all their miseries."
"Turn round," he said, "and let thy well-loved eyes
Behold the sea from this high grassy hill,
And thou shalt see the risen waves now fill
The bay from horn to horn of it: no more
Thy footprints bless the shell-strewn sandy shore,
The vale the monster scooped, as 'neath my sword
He writhed, the black stream that from out him poured,
The rock we sat on, and the pool wherein
Thou sawest the gods' revenge for heedless sin—
How the green ripples of the shallow sea
Cover the strife and passion peacefully,
Nor lack the hallowing of the low broad sun.
"So has love stolen upon us, lovely one,
And quenched our old lives in this new delight,
And if thou needs must think of that dull night
That creepeth on no otherwise than this,
Yet for that thought hold closer to thy bliss,
Come nigher, come! forget the more thy pain.

So there of all love's feasting were they fain,
Words fail to tell the joyance that they had,
And with what words they made each other glad.

So, as it drew to ending of the day,
Unto the city did they take their way,
And when they stood before its walls at last
They found the heavy gate thereof shut fast,
And no one on the walls for very shame;
Then to the wicket straightway Perseus came,
And down the monster's grinning head he threw,
While on the horn a mighty blast he blew,
But no one answered; then he cried aloud,
"Come forth, O warders, and no more shrink cowed
Behind your battlements! one man alone
Has dared to do what thousands have not done,
And the great beast besides the sea lies dead:
Come forth, come forth! and gaze upon this head!"
Then opened was the door a little way,
And one peered forth and saw him with the may
And turning round some joyous words he cried
Unto the rest, who oped the great gates wide,
And through them Perseus the saved maiden led.
Then as the folk cast eyes upon the head,
They stopped their shouts to gaze thereon with fear,
And timidly the women drew anear;
But soon, beholding Perseus' godlike grace,
His mighty limbs, and flushed and happy face,
Cried out unto the maid, "O happy thou,
Who art well paid for every trouble now,
In winning such a godlike man as this."
And many there were fain his skirts to kiss;
But he smiled down on them, and said, "Rejoice,
O girls, indeed, but yet lift heart and voice
Unto the gods to-day, and not to me!
For they it was who sent me to this sea,
And first of all fail not to bless the Maid,
Through whom it came that I was not afraid."
So through the streets they went, and quickly spread
News that the terror of the land was dead.
And folk thronged round to see the twain go by,
Or went before with flowers and minstrelsy,
Rejoicing for the slaying of their shame.

Thus harbinger'd the happy lovers came
Unto King Cepheus' royal house of gold.
To whom by this the joyful cries had told
That all was changed and still his days were good,
So, eager in his well-built porch he stood,
No longer now in mournful raiment clad.
But when they met, then were those two more glad
Than words can say; there came her mother, too,
And round about her neck fair arms she threw,
Weeping for joy; and all about the King
The great men stood and eyed the fearful thing
That lay at Perseus' feet: then the King said,
"O thou, who on this day hast saved my maid,
Wilt thou rule half my kingdom from to-day?
Or wilt thou carry half my wealth away?
Or in some temple shall we honour thee,
Setting thine image up beside the sea?
Ask what thou wilt before these mighty lords,
And straightway is it thine without more words."
Then in his heart laughed Perseus: and, "O King,"
He said, "I ask indeed a mighty thing;
Yet neither will I take thy wealth away,
Or make thee less a king than on this day,
And in no temple shall mine image stand
To look upon the sea that beats the land,
For fear the God who now is friend to me
Thereby should come to be mine enemy;
And yet on this day am I grown so bold,
I ask a greater gift than power or gold;
Give me thy maiden saved, to be my bride,
And let me go, because the world is wide,
And the gods hate me not, and I am fain
Some fertile land with these my hands to gain.
Nor think thereby that thou wilt get thee shame,
For if thou askest of my race and name,
Perseus I am, the son of Danaë,
Born nigh to Argos, by the sounding sea,
And those that know, call me the son of Jove,
Who in past days my mother's face did love."
Then, glad at heart, the King said, "Poor indeed
Were such a gift, to give thee to thy meed

This that thine own unconquered hands have won.
O ye! bring now the head and cast thereon
Jewels and gold from out my treasury,
Till nothing of its grimness men can see;
And let folk bring round to the harbour mouth
My ship that saileth yearly to the south;
That to his own land since it is his will
This Prince may go; nor yet without his fill
Of that which all men long for everywhere,
Honour, and gold, and women kind and fair.
And ye, O lords, to-morrow ere midday,
Come hither to my house in great array,
For then this marriage will we solemnise,
Appeasing all the gods with gifts of price."
Then loud all shouted, and the end of day
Being come, Andromeda was led away
Unto her bower, and there within a while
She fell asleep, and in her sleep did smile,
For on the calm of that forgetfulness
Her bliss but happy longings did impress.
But in the Syrian King's adornéd hall
Sat Perseus till the shadows 'gan to fall
Shorter beneath the moon, and still he thought
Amid the feast of what a day had brought
Unto his heart, a foolish void before;
And for the morrow must he long so sore
That all those joyances and minstrelsy
Seemed unto him but empty things to be.

Early next morn the city was astir,
And country folk came in from far and near
Hearing the joyous tidings that the beast
Was dead, and fain to see the marriage feast,
And joyous folk wandered from street to street
Crowned with fair flowers and singing carols sweet.
Then to the maiden's chamber maidens came,
And woke her up to love and joyous shame,
And as the merry sun streamed through the room
Spread out unequalled marvels of the loom,
Stored up for such an end in days long done,
Ere yet her grey eyes looked upon the sun;
Fine webs like woven mist, wrought in the dawn,
Long ere the dew had left the sunniest lawn,
Gold cloth so wrought that nought of gold seemed there,
But rather sunlight over blossoms fair;
You would have said that gods had made them, bright,
To hide her body from the common light
Lest men should die from unfulfilled desire.
Gems too they showed wrought by the hidden fire
That eats the world, and from the unquiet sea
Pearls worth the ransom of an argosy.
Yet all too little all these riches seemed
In worship of her, who as one who dreamed,
By her fair maidens' hands was there arrayed,
Then, with loose hair, ungirded as a maid
Unto the threshold of the house was brought,
But when her hand familiar fingers caught
And when that voice, that erst amidst her fear
She deemed a god's, now smote upon her ear
Like one new-born to heaven she seemed to be.
But dreamlike was the long solemnity,
Unreal the joyous streets, where yesterday
She passed half dead upon her wretched way;
And though before the flickering altar-flame
She trembled when she thought of that past shame,
And midst the shouting knit her brows to think
Of what a cup these men had bidden her drink,
Unreal they seemed, forgotten as a tale
We cannot tell, though it may still avail
For pensive thoughts betwixt the day and night.
All things unto the gods were done aright;
Beside the sea the flame and smoke uprose
Over rich gifts of many things to those
A woman's tongue had wounded; golden veils
And images, and bowls wrought o'er with tales,
By all the altars of the gods were laid;
On this last day of maidenhood the maid
Had stood before the shrines, and there had thrown
Sweet incense on the flame, and through the town
The praises of immortals had been sung,
And sacred flowers about the houses hung;
And now the last hours of the dreamlike day
Amid great feasting slowly passed away.

But in that land there was a mighty lord,
To whom erewhile the King had pledged his word
That he should wed Andromeda, and he
Heard through sure friends of this festivity
And raged thereat, and thought that eve to come
Unbidden to the feast and bear her home;
Phineus his name was, great amidst great men.
He setting out, came to the great hall when
The sun was well-nigh down, all armed was he,
And at his back came on tumultuously
His armed men-slaves, and folk that loved him dear.
Beholding him, the King rose up in fear,
And all about the place scared folk uprose
As men surprised at feast by deadly foes;
But Perseus laughing said, "What feat do ye
This eve in honour of my sweet and me?
Or are ye but the servants of the King
Returned from doing for him some great thing
In a far land? then sit here and be glad,
For on this day the King feeds good and bad."
Then inarticulate with rage and grief
Phineus turned on him, snatching at a sheaf
Of darts that hung against a pillar there,
And hurled one at him, that sung through his hair
And slew a serving varlet by his side;
Then finding voice, he faced the King and cried,

"What dost thou drinking with this robber here,
Who comes to steal that which I hold so dear
That on my knees I prayed for her to thee?
Speak, Cepheus! wilt thou give her yet to me
And have good peace withal, or wilt thou die?
Ho, friends, and ye that follow, cry my cry!"

Then straight the hall rang with a mighty shout
Of "Phineus," and from sheath and belt leapt out
The gleaming steel, and Cepheus stammering
Took heart to say, "Think well upon this thing;
What should I do? the man did save her life,
And her he might have made his slave, as wife
He asks for now; take gifts and go thy way
Nor quench in blood the joyance of this day."
Then forth stood Perseus with a frowning face
Before them all, and cried out from his place,
"Get ye behind my back, all friends to me!
And ere the lamps are lighted ye shall see
A stranger thing than ye have ever dreamed;"
And as he spake in his left hand there gleamed
The gold-wrought satchel; but amazed and cowed
Did the King's friends behind the hero crowd,
Who, ere from out the bag he drew the head,
Unto that band of fierce new-comers said:
"Will ye have life or death? if life, then go
And on the grass outside your armour throw,
And then returning, drink to my delight
Until the summer sun puts out the night."
But loud they shouted, swaying to and fro,
And mocked at him, and cried aloud to know
If in his hand Jove's thunderbolt he had,
Or Mars' red sword that makes the eagles glad;
But Phineus, raging, cried, "Take him alive,
That we for many an hour the wretch may drive
With thongs and clubs until he longs to die!"
Then all set on him with a mighty cry,
But, with a shout that thrilled high over theirs,
He drew the head out by the snaky hairs
And turned on them the baleful glassy eyes;
Then sank to silence all that storm of cries
And clashing arms; the tossing points that shone
In the last sunbeams, went out one by one
As the sun left them, for each man there died,
E'en as the shepherd on the bare hill-side,
Smitten amid the grinding of the storm;
When, while the hare lies flat in her wet form,
E'en strong men quake for fear in houses strong,
And nigh the ground the lightning runs along.
But upright on their feet the dead men stood,
In brow and cheek still flushed the angry blood;
This smiled, the mouth of that was open wide,
This other drew the great sword from his side,
All were at point to do this thing or that.

But silent in the hall the living sat
As those dead men, till Perseus turned at last
And over all a kingly look he cast,
And said, "O friends, drink yet one cup to me,
And then to-morrow will I try the sea
With this my love; and, sweet Andromeda,
Forgive me that I needs must play this play;
Forget it, sweet! thou wilt not see again
This land of thine, upland, or hill, or plain;
There where we go shall all be new to thee
Except the love that thou hast won from me."
Then to her frightened face there came a smile,
And in her cheeks within a little while
Sweet colour came again; but right few words
Upon that night were said of king or lords.

But soon again the lovers were alone
Of all the sons of men remembering none,
Forgetting every god but him whose bow
About the vexed and flowery earth doth go.

So on the morn, when risen was the sun,
About the capstan did the shipmen run,
Warping the great ship to the harbour mouth
That yearly went for treasures to the south,
And thither from the palace did men bear
Bales of rich cloth, and golden vessels rare,
And gold new coined, and silver bars of weight.
And women-slaves with bodies slim and straight
Stood on the snow-white deck, and strong men-slaves,
Brought from some conquered land beyond the waves,
Bore down rich burdens; so when all things due
Were laid on ship-board, and to noon it grew
Thither came Perseus with his new-wed wife,
And she, as losing somewhat of her life
Was pensive now, and silent; and regret
Moved in her that her heart must soon forget
All folk and things where first her life began,
Yea, e'en the mother, whose worn face and wan,
Tearless and haughty, yet looked o'er the sea,
As though the life wherein no good could be
She still would bear in every god's despite—
—Ah, folk forget; the damsel's heart grew light
E'en while her country's cliffs she yet could see.
Should she remember, when so lovingly
That cheek touched hers, and he was hers alone?

Love while ye may; if twain grow into one
'Tis for a little while; the time goes by,
No hatred 'twixt the pair of friends doth lie,
No troubles break their hearts—and yet, and yet—
How could it be? we strove not to forget;
Rather in vain to that old time we clung,
Its hopes and wishes round our hearts we hung,

We played old parts, we used old names—in vain,
We go our ways, and twain once more are twain;
Let pass—at latest when we come to die
Thus shall the fashion of the world go by.
But these, while still at brightest love's flame burned,
Were glad indeed, as towards Seriphos turned
Bright shone their gilded prow against the sun.

Meanwhile the folk of Joppa, one by one,
Took Phineus' people and their master dead
All turned to stone as they had seen the head,
And in a lonely place they set them down,
Upon a hill that overlooked the town.
And round about them built a wall, four-square,
And at each corner raised a temple fair,
And therein altars made they unto Jove,
Pallas, and Neptune, and the God of Love;
And in Jove's temple carved that history,
That those who came there after them might see,
From first to last, how all these things were done,
And how these men last looked upon the sun.

But the two lovers going on their way
Grew happier still, as bright day followed day;
And, the wind favouring, in a little while
They reached the low shore of the friendly isle;
And, having beached the well-built keel, took land
Where Danaë's boat first touched the yellow sand.
Then cityward alone did Perseus go
His fatal gift unto the King to show;
And, passing through the fair fields hastily,
Reached the green precinct, where he thought to see
His mother, he had left alive and well;
But from inside upon his ears there fell
A noise of shrieks and clashing arms and shouts;
Thereto he ran beset with many doubts,
Since Polydectes' evil wiles he knew,
And what a fate he erst had doomed him to;
So, hurrying through, he reached the shrine at last,
And there beheld his mother, her arms cast
About Minerva's image, and by her
Good Dictys, who, with shield and glittering spear,
Abode the onslaught of an armed band,
At head of whom did Polydectes stand.
Then to her side sprang Perseus with a cry,
And at that sight and sound she spake on high,
"Com'st thou, long looked for? nothing fear I now,
This kingly traitor soon shall lie alow."
Then the King tottered backward, and awhile
Stood staring at him: but an evil smile
Soon hid his fear, as, turning, he beheld
The glittering weapons that his stout slaves held,
And he cried out, "Yea, art thou back again?
And was my story forged for thee in vain?
Be merry then, but give me place or die!
I am not one to meet thee fearfully.
But thee, O brother, must I then slay thee,
And in our house must one more story be?
Give back! nor for a woman's foolishness,
Bring curses on the name thou shouldest bless.
—Set on at once then! take the three of them!"
Then once more clashed the spears, but on the hem
Of that dread satchel Perseus set his hand,
And put his friend aside, and took his stand
Betwixt his mother and the island men;
And terribly he cried, "Thus take thou then
The gift thou bad'st me bring to thee! nor ask
Of any man again another task,
Except to throw on thee a little sand
That thou may'st reach in peace the shadowy land."
His mocking speech he ended with a shout,
And from the bag the dreadful head drew out,
And shook it in the King's bewildered face;
Who unto him yet strove to make one pace
With feebly brandished spear and drooping shield,
Then unto stony death his heart did yield,
And without any cry upright he died,
With fallen arms and fixed eyes staring wide.
But of his men the bravest turned and fled,
And on the ground some trembled, well-nigh dead
For very fear, till Perseus cried, "Arise,
Lay down your arms and go! Henceforth be wise;
Nor at kings' biddings 'gainst the just gods strive."
But as they slunk away, too glad to live
To need more words, and shivering with their dread,
Once more did Perseus hide the fearful head,
And toward his mother turned; who, with pale face,
Stood trembling there, remembering that embrace
Within the brazen house; but now he threw
His arms about her as he used to do
When her own arms his little body bore;
And smiling, even as he smiled of yore,
He said, "O mother, fear me not at all,
But yet bethink thee of the brazen wall
And golden Jove, nor doubt from him I came;
And no more now shall I be called thy shame,
But thy defence and glory everywhere.

"But now to lovely Argos let us fare,
Too small a land this is become for thee,
And I may hope a greater sovereignty,
Who, by God's help, have done such mighty things,
Which I will tell thee of, while the wind sings
Amongst the shrouds of my rich-laden keel,
While by thy feet a god-given gift shall kneel,
My bride new won; in such-like guise will we
Come back to him who gave us to the sea,

And make our peace and all ill blood forget,
That through long happy years thou may'st live yet."
Then did he take good Dictys by the hand,
And said, "O righteous man, we leave this land,
Nor leave thee giftless for the welcoming
Thou gav'st us erst, nor for this other thing
That thou hast wrought for us this happy tide;
Therefore do thou as King herein abide,
And win Jove's love by helping in such wise
As thou didst us, folk sunk in miseries."
So gave he kingdoms, as he took away,
For strong the God was in him on that day,
And the gods smiled to hear him; yea, and she
Who armed him erst, then dealt so lovingly,
She caused the people's hearts towards him to yearn,
Who, thronging round, began somehow to learn
The story of his deeds, and cried aloud,
"Be thou our King!" Then showed he to the crowd
Dictys his friend, and said, "I to my kin
Must go, mine heritage and goods to win,
And deal a king, with kings; but yet see here
This royal man, my helpful friend and dear;
Loved of the gods, surely he is of worth
For greater things." So saying he went forth
And midst their reverence, leading by the hand
His happy mother, turned unto the strand;
And still the wondering folk with them must go,
And now such honour unto him would show,
That rather they would make him God than King;
But while fresh carols round him these did sing
They came unto the low, sea-beaten sand;
And Danaë took the Syrian by the hand
And kissed her, full of joy that such an one
Should bear brave children to her godlike son:
Then Perseus gave command, and on the shore
Great gifts they laid from out his plenteous store,
To glad King Dictys' eyes withal, and then
Bade farewell to him and his island men;
And all took ship, and hoisting sail straightway,
Departed o'er the restless plain and grey.

Now fair the wind was for a day and night,
But on the second day as it grew light,
And they were thinking that they soon should be
At Argos, rose a tempest on the sea,
And drave them from their course unto a land
Far north thereof. So on the yellow sand
They hauled their ship, and thereto presently
The good folk of the country drew anigh,
To make their market; and being asked, they said
That this was Thessaly, that strait paths led
Through rugged mountains to a fertile plain
Peneus watered, rich with many a fane:
That following down the stream they soon should come
Unto a mighty people's glorious home,
A god-loved ancient city, called of men
Larissa, and the time was fitting then
To go thereto, and there should they have rest,
For now each comer was an honoured guest,
Because Teutamias, the Thessalian king,
His father dead with games was honouring.
Then to that city Perseus fain would go,
His might unto the gathered men to show;
Desiring, too, to gather tidings there
Of how the old Acrisius yet might fare,
And if unto his scarce-seen Argive home
He in good peace might venture now to come.
So of the country folk he took fair steeds
And gave them gold, and goods for all their needs,
And with a trusty band with this intent
Through the rough passes of the hills he went,
Bearing his mother, and the Syrian may:
As of a king's men deemed of his array,
When to the fertile peopled fields he came;
But yet he bade that none should tell his name.
So coming to Larissa, all men thought,
That he who with him such great marvels brought
Was some great king, though scanty was his band;
So honour did he get on every hand.
But when the games began, and none could win
A prize in any, if he played therein,
A greater name they gave him, saying, "What worth
In this poor age is left upon the earth
To do such deeds? Surely no man this is,
But some god weary of the heavenly bliss."
At last, when all the other games were done,
Men fell to play at casting of the stone;
And strong men cast it, mighty of their hands,
Bearers of great names in the Grecian lands:
But Perseus stood and watched the play alone,
Nor did he move when every man had thrown.
Then cried Teutamias, "Nameless one! see now
How mightily these strong-armed heroes throw:
Canst thou prevail in this as in the rest?"
"O King!" said Perseus, "now I think it best
To try the Fates no more; I must be gone:
Therefore to-day thou seest me thus alone,
For in the house my white-armed damsels stay
To order matters for our homeward way."
"Nay, stranger," said the King, "but rather take
This golden garland for Teutamias' sake,
And try one cast: look, here I have with me
A well-loved guest, who is most fain to see
Thy godlike strength, yea we will draw anigh
To watch the heavy stone like Jove's bolt fly

Forth from thine hand." Then Perseus smiled and said,
"Nay then, be wary, and guard well thine head!
For who of mortals knoweth where and when
The bolts of Jove shall smite down foolish men?"
So said he, and withal the King drew nigh,
And with him an old man, who anxiously
Peered round him as if looking for a foe.
Then Perseus made him ready for the throw,
But even as he stooped the stone to raise,
The old man said, "That I the more may praise
This hero's cast, come to the other end
And we shall see the hill of granite send
The earth and stones up as its course is spent."
So then beyond the furthest cast they went
By some three yards, and stood aside; but now
Since it was evening and the sun was low
Its beams were in their eyes, nor could they see
If Perseus moved or not, then restlessly
Looking this way or that, the ancient man,
Gathering his garments up, in haste began
To cross the place, but when a warning shout
Rang in his ears, then wavering and in doubt
He stopped, and scarcely had he time to hear
A second cry of horror and of fear,
Ere crushed, and beaten down upon the ground,
The end of all his weary life he found.

Then women shrieked, and strong men shouted out,
And Perseus ran to those that drew about
The slain old man, and asked them of his name,
But the King, eyeing him as nigh he came,
Said, "This we know, and thy hid name we know,
For certainly thou art his fated foe,
His very daughter's strange-begotten son,
The child the sea cast up, the dreaded one.
This was Acrisius, who for fear of thee
Shut up thy mother by the sounding sea;
This was the man, who, for the very dread
Of meeting thee, from lovely Argos fled
To be my guest. Nay, let thy sharp sword bide
Within its sheath, the world is fair and wide,
Nor have we aught to do to thee for this;
Go then in peace, and live in woe or bliss
E'en as thou may'st, but stay with us no more,
Because we fear the gods may plague us sore
For this thy deed, though they would have it so."

Then soberly thenceforth did Perseus go
Unto his folk, and straightly told them all
That on that luckless day had chanced to fall;
Wondering thereat, there made they no delay,
But down unto the sea they took their way;
And much did Danaë ponder as they went
How the high gods had wrought out their intent,
And thinking on these things she needs must sigh
For pity of her sweet life passing by.
But when they reached the border of the sea,
Then Perseus said, "Though all unwittingly
I slew this man, and though perchance of right
His throne is mine, yet never will I fight
Against the just gods, and I fear the stain
Of kindred blood, if slaying him I gain
His kingdom and the city of my birth:
Now, therefore, since the gods have made the earth
Most fair in many places, let us go
Where'er the god-sent fated wind shall blow
The ship, that carries one the high gods love.
But first the bright-armed lovely maid of Jove
Here let us worship, on this yellow beach,
That her, my helper erst, we may beseech
To grant us much, and first of all things, this,
A land where we may dwell awhile in bliss."
They heard him gladly, for the most of those
Were young, nor yet by mishaps and by foes
Had learned to think the world a dreary thing;
So round about the altar did they sing
And feasted well, and when the day came round
Once more, they went a-shipboard to the sound
Of trumpets and heart-moving melody,
And gave their rich keel to the restless sea.
Then for four days before the wind they drove,
Until at last in sight a new land hove
Their pilot called the coast of Argolis,
That rich in cattle and in horses is.
But landing there had Perseus' godlike fame
Gone on before him, and the people came
And cried upon him for their king and lord,
The people's saving shield and conquering sword;
So in that land he failed not to abide,
And there with many rites he purified
His fated hands of that unlooked-for guilt:
And there a town within a while he built
Men call Mycenæ. Peaceful grew the land
The while the ivory rod was in his hand,
For robbers fled, and good men still waxed strong,
And in no house was any sound of wrong,
Until the Golden Age seemed there to be,
So steeped the land was in felicity.

Time past, and there his wife and mother died,
And he, no god, must lie down by their side,
While Alceus his first son reigned after him,
A conquering king, and fair, and strong of limb.

But long ere this he did not fail to lay
The sacred things that brought him on his way

Within Minerva's temple; there with awe
'Twixt silver bars, all folk these marvels saw,
But not for long, for on the twentieth day
From the fair temple were they snatched away
Though by the armed priests guarded faithfully.
But still the empty wallet there did lie
Wherein had Perseus borne the head with him,
Which still when his great deeds were waxing dim,
Hung in the Maiden's temple near the shrine,
And folk would pour before it oil and wine.

And know besides, that from that very year
Those who are wise say that the Maid doth bear
Amidst her shield that awful snaky head
Whereby so many heedless ones are dead.

BEFORE the last words of his tale were done
The purple hills had hidden half the sun,
But when the story's death a silence made
Within the hall, in freshness and in shade
The trembling blossoms of the garden lay.
Few words at first the elder men could say
For thinking how all stories end with this,
Whatever was the midway gain and bliss:
"He died, and in his place was set his son;
He died, and in a few days every one
Went on their way as though he had not been."
Yet with the pictures that their eyes had seen,
As still from point to point that history past,
And round their thoughts its painted veil was cast,
Their hearts were softened,—far away they saw
That other world, that 'neath another law
Had lived and died; when man might hope to see
Some earthly image of Divinity,
And yet not die, but, strengthened by the sight,
Cast fear away, and go from might to might,
Until to godlike life, though short, he came,
Amidst all losses winning hope of fame,
Nor losing joy the while his life should 'dure;
For that at least his valiant strife made sure,
That still in place of dreamy, youthful hope,
With slow decay and certain death could cope.
So mused the Wanderers, and awhile might deem
That world might not be quite an empty dream,
But dim foreshadowings of what yet might come
When they perforce must leave that new-gained home;
Foreshadowings mingled with the images
Of man's misdeeds in greater days than these.

With no harsh words their musing was undone,
The garden birds sang down the setting sun,
A rainy wind from 'twixt the trees arose,
And sang a mournful counterpoint to those;
And, ere the rain amidst the dark could fall,
The minstrel's song was ringing through the hall.

WHEN April-tide was melting into May,
Within a hall that midst the gardens lay
These elders met, and having feasted well,
The time came round the wonted tale to tell.
Then spake a Wanderer: "Sirs, it happed to me,
Long years agone, to cross the narrow sea
That 'twixt us Drontheimers and England lies;
Young was I then, and little thought these eyes
Should see so many lands ere all was done.
"But this land was a fair and fertile one,
As at that time, for April-tide it was,
Even as now; well, sirs, it came to pass
That to this town or that we took our way,
Or in some abbey's guesten-chamber lay,
And many tales we heard, some false, some true,
Of the ill deeds our fathers used to do
Within that land; and still the tale would end,
'Yet did the Saint his Holy House defend;'
Or, 'Sirs, their fury all was nought and vain,
And by our Earl the pirate-king was slain.'
God wot, I laughed full often in my sleeve,
And could have told them stories, by their leave,
With other endings: but I held my tongue.
Let each king's deeds in his own land be sung,
And then will lies stretch far. Besides, these men
Were puffed up with their luck and glory then,
For at that tide, within the land of France,
Unto their piping must all people dance.—
—But let that pass, for Captain Rolf has told
How, on the way, their king he did behold.

"For other tales they told, and one of these
Not all the washing of the troublous seas,
Not all the changeful days whereof ye know,
Have swept from out my memory; even so
Small things far off will be remembered clear
When matters both more weighty, and more near,
Are waxing dim to us. I, who have seen
So many lands, and midst such marvels been,
Clearer than these abodes of outland men,
Can see above the green and unburnt fen
The little houses of an English town,
Cross-timbered, thatched with fen-reeds coarse and brown,

And high o'er these, three gables, great and fair,
That slender rods of columns do upbear
Over the minster doors, and imagery
Of kings, and flowers no summer field doth see,
Wrought on those gables.—Yea, I heard withal,
In the fresh morning air, the trowels fall
Upon the stone, a thin noise far away;
For high up wrought the masons on that day,
Since to the monks that house seemed scarcely well
Till they had set a spire or pinnacle
Each side the great porch. In that burgh I heard
This tale, and late have set down every word
That I remembered, when the thoughts would come
Of what we did in our deserted home,
And of the days, long past, when we were young,
Nor knew the cloudy woes that o'er us hung.
And howsoever I am now grown old,
Yet is it still the tale I then heard told
Within the guest-house of that minster-close,
Whose walls, like cliffs new-made, before us rose."

THE PROUD KING.

ARGUMENT.

A certain king, blinded by pride, thought that he was something more than man, if not equal to God; but such a judgment fell on him that none knew him for king, and he suffered many things, till in the end, humbling himself, he regained his kingdom and honour.

IN a far country that I cannot name,
And on a year long ages past away,
A King their dwelt, in rest and ease and fame,
And richer than the Emperor is to-day:
The very thought of what this man might say,
From dusk to dawn kept many a lord awake,
For fear of him did many a great man quake.

Young was he when he first sat on the throne,
And he was wedded to a noble wife,
But at the daïs must he sit alone,
Nor durst a man speak to him for his life
Except with leave: nought knew he change or strife,
But that the years passed silently away,
And in his black beard gathered specks of grey.

Now so it chanced, upon a May morning,
Wakeful he lay when yet low was the sun,
Looking distraught at many a royal thing,
And counting up his titles one by one,
And thinking much of things that he had done;
For full of life he felt, and hale and strong,
And knew that none durst say when he did wrong.

For no man now could give him dread or doubt,
The land was 'neath his sceptre far and wide,
And at his beck would well-armed myriads shout.
Then swelled his vain, unthinking heart with pride,
Until at last he raised him up and cried,
"What need have I for temple or for priest?
Am I not God, whiles that I live at least?"

And yet withal that dead his fathers were,
He needs must think, that quick the years pass by;
But he, who seldom yet had seen death near
Or heard his name, said, "Still I may not die
Though underneath the earth my fathers lie;
My sire indeed was called a mighty king,
Yet in regard of mine, a little thing

"His kingdom was; moreover his grandsire
To him was but a prince of narrow lands,
Whose father, though to things he did aspire
Beyond most men, a great knight of his hands,
Yet ruled some little town where now there stands
The kennel of my dogs; then may not I
Rise higher yet, nor like poor wretches die?

'Since up the ladder ever we have gone
Step after step nor fallen back again;
And there are tales of people who have won
A life enduring, without care or pain,
Or any man to make their wishes vain;
Perchance this prize unwitting now I hold;
For times change fast, the world is waxen old."

So mid these thoughts once more he fell asleep,
And when he woke again, high was the sun,
Then quickly from his gold bed did he leap,
And of his former thoughts remembered none,
But said, "To-day through green woods will we run,
Nor shall to-day be worse than yesterday,
But better it may be, for game and play."

So for the hunt was he apparelled,
And forth he rode with heart right well at ease;
And many a strong, deep-chested hound they led,
Over the dewy grass betwixt the trees,
And fair white horses fit for the white knees
Of Her the ancients fabled rides a-nights
Betwixt the setting and the rising lights.

Now following up a mighty hart and swift
The King rode long upon that morning tide,
And since his horse was worth a kingdom's gift,
It chanced him all his servants to outride,
Until unto a shaded river-side
He came alone at hottest of the sun,
When all the freshness of the day was done.

Dismounting there, and seeing so far a-down
The red-finned fishes o'er the gravel play,
It seemed that moment worth his royal crown
To hide there from the burning of the day,
Wherefore he did off all his rich array,
And tied his horse unto a neighbouring tree,
And in the water sported leisurely.

But when he was fulfilled of this delight
He gat him to the bank well satisfied,
And thought to do on him his raiment bright
And homeward to his royal house to ride;
But 'mazed and angry, looking far and wide
Nought saw he of his horse and rich attire,
And 'gainst the thief 'gan threaten vengeance dire.

But little help his fury was to him,
So lustily he 'gan to shout and cry,
None answered; still the lazy chub did swim
By inches 'gainst the stream; away did fly
The small pied bird, but nathless stayed anigh,
And o'er the stream still plied his fluttering trade,
Of such a helpless man not much afraid.

Weary of crying in that lonely place
He ceased at last, and thinking what to do,
E'en as he was, up stream he set his face,
Since not far off a certain house he knew
Where dwelt his ranger, a lord leal and true,
Who many a bounty at his hands had had,
And now to do him ease would be right glad.

Thither he hastened on, and as he went
The hot sun sorely burned his naked skin,
The whiles he thought, "When he to me has lent
Fine raiment, and at ease I sit within
His coolest chamber clad in linen thin,
And drinking wine, the best that he has got,
I shall forget this troublous day and hot."

Now note, that while he thus was on his way,
And still his people for their master sought,
There met them one who in the King's array
Bestrode his very horse, and as they thought
Was none but he in good time to them brought,
Therefore they hailed him King, and so all rode
From out the forest to his fair abode.

And there in royal guise he sat at meat,
Served, as his wont was, 'neath the canopy,
And there the hounds fawned round about his feet,
And there that city's elders did he see,
And with his lords took counsel what should be;
And there at supper when the day waxed dim
The Queen within his chamber greeted him.

Leave we him there; for to the ranger's gate
The other came, and on the horn he blew,
Till peered the wary porter through the grate
To see if he, perchance, the blower knew,
Before he should the wicket-gate undo;
But when he saw him standing there, he cried,
"What dost thou, friend, to show us all thine hide?

"We list not buy to-day or flesh or fell;
Go home and get thyself a shirt at least,
If thou wouldst aught, for saith our vicar well,
That God hath given clothes e'en to the beast."
Therewith he turned to go, but as he ceased
The King cried out, "Open, O foolish man!
I am thy lord and King, Jovinian;

"Go now, and tell thy master I am here
Desiring food and clothes, and in this plight,
And then hereafter need'st thou have no fear,
Because thou didst not know me at first sight."
"Yea, yea, I am but dreaming in the night,"
The carle said, "and I bid thee, friend, to dream,
Come through! here is no gate, it doth but seem."

With that his visage vanished from the grate;
But when the King now found himself alone,
He hurled himself against the mighty gate,
And beat upon it madly with a stone,
Half wondering midst his rage, how any one
Could live, if longed-for things he chanced to lack;
But midst all this, at last the gate flew back,

And there the porter stood, brown-bill in hand,
And said, "Ah, fool, thou makest this ado,
Wishing before my lord's high seat to stand;
Thou shalt be gladder soon hereby to go,
Or surely nought of handy blows I know.
Come, willy nilly, thou shalt tell this tale
Unto my lord, if aught it may avail."

With that his staff he handled, as if he
Would smite the King, and said, "Get on before!
St. Mary! now thou goest full leisurely,
Who, erewhile, fain wouldst batter down the door.
See now, if ere this matter is passed o'er,
I come to harm, yet thou shalt not escape,
Thy back is broad enow to pay thy jape."

Half blind with rage the King before him passed,
But nought of all he doomed him to durst say,
Lest he from rest nigh won should yet be cast,
So with a swelling heart he took his way,
Thinking right soon his shame to cast away,
And the carle followed still, ill satisfied
With such a wretched losel to abide.

Fair was the ranger's house and new and white,
And by the King built scarce a year agone,
And carved about for this same lord's delight
With woodland stories deftly wrought in stone;
There oft the King was wont to come alone,
For much he loved this lord, who erst had been
A landless squire, a servant of the Queen.

Now long a lord and clad in rich attire,
In his fair hall he sat before the wine
Watching the evening sun's yet burning fire,
Through the close branches of his pleasance shine,
In mood of him who deems himself divine,
Remembering not whereto we all must come,
Not thinking aught but of his happy home.

From just outside loud mocking merriment
He heard midst this; and therewithal a squire
Came hurrying up, his laughter scarcely spent,
Who said, "My lord, a man in such attire
As Adam's, ere he took the devil's hire,
Who saith that thou wilt know him for the King,
Up from the gate John Porter needs must bring.

"He to the King is nothing like in aught
But that his beard he weareth in such guise
As doth my lord: wilt thou that he be brought?
Perchance some treason 'neath his madness lies."
"Yea," saith the ranger, "that may well be wise
But haste, for now am I right well at ease,
Nor would be wearied with such folk as these."

Then went the squire, and coming back again,
The porter and the naked King brought in,
Who thinking now that this should end his pain,
Forgat his fury and the porter's sin,
And said, "Thou wonderest how I came to win
This raiment, that kings long have ceased to wear,
Since Noah's flood has altered all the air?

"Well, thou shalt know; but first I pray thee, Hugh,
Reach me that cloak that lieth on the board,
For certes, though thy folk are leal and true,
It seemeth that they deem a mighty lord
Is made by crown, and silken robe, and sword;
Lo, such are borel folk; but thou and I
Fail not to know the signs of majesty.

"Thou risest not! thou lookest strange on me!
Ah, what is this? Who reigneth in my stead?
How long hast thou been plotting secretly?
Then slay me now, for if I be not dead
Armies will rise up when I nod my head.
Slay me!—or cast thy treachery away,
And have anew my favour from this day."

"Why should I tell thee that thou ne'er wast king?"
The ranger said; "thou knowest not my mind.
Poor man, I pray God help thee in this thing;
And, ere thou diest, send thee days more kind;
And help from us a-going shalt thou find.
Good fellows, this poor creature is but mad,
Take him, and in a coat let him be clad;

"And give him meat and drink, and on this night
Beneath some roof of ours let him abide,
For some day God may set his folly right."
Then spread the King his arms abroad and cried,
"Woe to thy food, thy house, and thee betide,
Thou loathsome traitor! Get ye from the hall,
Lest smitten by God's hand this roof should fall;

"Yea, if the world be but an idle dream,
And God deals nought with it, yet shall ye see
Red flame from out these carven windows stream.
I, I, will burn this vile place utterly,
And strewn with salt the poisonous earth shall be,
That such a wretch of such a man has made,
That so such Judases may grow afraid."

Thus raving, those who held him he shook off
And rushed from out the hall, nigh mad indeed,
And gained the gate, not heeding blow or scoff,
Nor longer of his nakedness took heed,
But ran, he knew not where, at headlong speed
Till, when at last his strength was fully spent,
Worn out, he fell beneath a woody bent.

But for the ranger, left alone in peace,
He bade his folk bring in the minstrelsy;
And thinking of his life, and fair increase
Of all his goods, a happy man was he,
And towards his master felt right lovingly,
And said, "This luckless madman will avail
When next I see the King for one more tale."

MEANWHILE Jovinian by the roadside lay,
Panting, confused, scarce knowing if he dreamed,
Until at last, when vanished was the day,
Through the dark night far off a bright light gleamed;
Which growing quickly, down the road there streamed
The glare of torches, held by men who ran
Before the litter of a mighty man.

These mixed with soldiers soon the road did fill,
And on their harness could the King behold
The badge of one erst wont to do his will,

A counsellor, a gatherer-up of gold,
Who underneath his rule had now grown old:
Then wrath and bitterness so filled his heart,
That from his wretched lair he needs must start.

And o'er the clatter shrilly did he cry,
"Well met, Duke Peter! ever art thou wise;
Surely thou wilt not let a day go by
Ere thou art good friends with mine enemies;
O fit to rule within a land of lies,
Go on thy journey, make thyself more meet
To sit in hell beneath the devil's feet!"

But as he ceased a soldier drew anear,
And smote him flatling with his sheathéd sword,
And said, "Speak louder, that my lord may hear
And give thee wages for thy ribald word!
Come forth, for I must show thee to my lord,
For he may think thee more than mad indeed,
Who of men's ways has taken wondrous heed."

Now was the litter stayed midmost the road,
And round about, the torches in a ring
Were gathered, and their flickering light now glowed
In gold and gems and many a lordly thing,
And showed that face well known unto the King,
That, smiling yesterday, right humble words
Had spoken midst the concourse of the lords.

But now he said, "Man, thou wert cursing me
If these folk heard aright; what wilt thou then,
Deem'st thou that I have done some wrong to thee,
Or hast thou scathe from any of my men?
In any case tell all thy tale again
When on the judgment-seat thou see'st me sit,
And I will give no careless ear to it."

"The night is dark, and in the summer wind
The torches flicker; canst thou see my face?
Bid them draw nigher yet, and call to mind
Who gave thee all thy riches and thy place—
—Well;—if thou canst, deny me, with such grace
As by the fire-light Peter swore of old,
When in that Maundy-week the night was cold—

"—Alas! canst thou not see I am the King?"
So spoke he, as their eyes met midst the blaze,
And the King saw the dread foreshadowing
Within the elder's proud and stony gaze,
Of what those lips, thin with the lapse of days,
Should utter now; nor better it befell;—
"Friend, a strange story thou art pleased to tell;

"Thy luck it is thou tellest it to me,
Who deem thee mad and let thee go thy way:
The King is not a man to pity thee,
Or on thy folly thy fool's tale to lay:
Poor fool! take this, and with the light of day,
Buy food and raiment of some labouring clown,
And by my counsel keep thee from the town;

"For fear thy madness break out in some place
Where folk thy body to the judge must hale,
And then indeed wert thou in evil case—
Press on, sirs! or the time will not avail."
—There stood the King, with limbs that 'gan to fail,
Speechless, and holding in his trembling hand
A coin new stamped for people of the land;

Thereon, with sceptre, crown, and royal robe,
The image of a King, himself, was wrought;
His jewelled feet upon a quartered globe,
As though by him all men were vain and nought.
One moment the red glare the silver caught,
As the lord ceased, the next his hurrying folk
The flaring circle round the litter broke.

The next, their shadows barred a patch of light,
Fast vanishing, all else around was black;
And the poor wretch, left lonely with the night,
Muttered, "I wish the day would ne'er come back,
If all that once I had I now must lack:
Ah God! how long is it since I was King,
Nor lacked enough to wish for anything?"

Then down the lonely road he wandered yet,
Following the vanished lights, he scarce knew why,
Till he began his sorrows to forget,
And, steeped in drowsiness, at last drew nigh
A grassy bank, where, worn with misery,
He slept the dreamless sleep of weariness,
That many a time such wretches' eyes will bless.

But at the dawn he woke, nor knew at first
What ugly chain of grief had brought him there,
Nor why he felt so wretched and accursed;
At last remembering, the fresh morning air,
The rising sun, and all things fresh and fair,
Yet caused some little hope in him to rise,
That end might come to these new miseries.

So looking round about, he saw that he
To his own city gates was come anear;
Then he arose and going warily,
And hiding now and then for very fear
Of folk who bore their goods and country cheer
Unto the city's market, at the last
Unto a stone's-throw of the gate he passed.

But when he drew unto the very gate,
Into the throng of country-folk he came
Who for the opening of the door did wait,
Of whom some mocked, and some cried at him shame,
And some would know his country and his name;
But one into his waggon drew him up,
And gave him milk from out a beechen cup,

And asked him of his name and misery;
Then in his throat a swelling passion rose,
Which yet he swallowed down, and, "Friend," said he,
"Last night I had the hap to meet the foes
Of God and man, who robbed me, and with blows
Stripped off my weed and left me on the way:
Thomas the Pilgrim am I called to-day.

"A merchant am I of another town,
And rich enow to pay thee for thy deed,
If at the King's door thou wilt set me down,
For there a squire I know, who at my need
Will give me food and drink, and fitting weed.
What is thy name? in what place dost thou live?
That I some day great gifts to thee may give."

"Fair sir," the carle said, "I am poor enow,
Though certes food I lack not easily;
My name is Christopher a-Green; I sow
A little orchard set with bush and tree,
And ever there the kind land keepeth me,
For I, now fifty, from a little boy
Have dwelt thereon, and known both grief and joy.

"The house my grandsire built there has grown old,
And certainly a bounteous gift it were
If thou shouldst give me just enough of gold
To build it new; nor shouldst thou lack my prayer
For such a gift." "Nay, friend, have thou no care,"
The King said: "this is but a little thing
To me, who oft am richer than the King."

Now as they talked the gate was opened wide,
And toward the palace went they through the street
And Christopher walked ever by the side
Of his rough wain, where midst the May-flowers sweet
Jovinian lay, that folk whom they might meet
Might see him not to mock at his bare skin:
So shortly to the King's door did they win.

Then through the open gate Jovinian ran
Of the first court, and no man stayed him there;
But as he reached the second gate, a man
Of the King's household, seeing him all bare
And bloody, cried out, "Whither dost thou fare?
Sure thou art seventy times more mad than mad,
Or else some magic potion thou hast had,

"Whereby thou fear'st not steel or anything."
"But," said the King, "good fellow, I know thee;
And can it be thou knowest not thy King?
Nay, thou shalt have a good reward of me,
That thou wouldst rather have than ten years' fee,
If thou wilt clothe me in fair weed again,
For now to see my council am I fain."

"Out, ribald!" quoth the fellow: "What say'st thou?
Thou art my lord, whom God reward and bless?
Truly before long shalt thou find out how
John Hangman cureth ill folk's wilfulness;
Yea, from his scourge the blood has run for less
Than that which now thou sayest: nay, what say I?
For lighter words have I seen tall men die.

"Come now, the sergeants to this thing shall see!"
So to the guard-room was Jovinian brought,
Where his own soldiers mocked him bitterly,
And all his desperate words they heeded nought;
Until at last there came to him this thought,
That never from this misery should he win,
But, spite of all his struggles, die therein.

And terrible it seemed, that everything
So utterly was changed since yesterday,
That these who were the soldiers of the King,
Ready to lie down in the common way
Before him, nor durst rest if he bade play,
Now stood and mocked him, knowing not the face
At whose command each man there had his place.

"Ah, God!" said he, "is this another earth
From that whereon I stood two days ago?
Or else in sleep have I had second birth?
Or among mocking shadows do I go,
Unchanged myself of flesh and fell, although
My fair weed I have lost and royal gear?
And meanwhile all are changed that meet me here;

"And yet in heart and nowise outwardly."
Amid his wretched thoughts two sergeants came,
Who said, "Hold, sirs! because the King would see
The man who thus so rashly brings him shame,
By taking his high style and spotless name,
That never has been questioned ere to-day.
Come, fool! needs is it thou must go our way."

So at the sight of him all men turned round,
As 'twixt these two across the courts he went,
With downcast head and hands together bound
While from the windows maid and varlet leant,
And through the morning air fresh laughter sent;
Until unto the threshold they were come
Of the great hall within that kingly home.

Therewith right fast Jovinian's heart must beat,
As now he thought, "Lo, here shall end the strife;
For either shall I sit on mine own seat,
Known unto all, soldier and lord and wife,
Or else is this the ending of my life,
And no man henceforth shall remember me,
And a vain name in records shall I be."

Therewith he raised his head up, and behelc
One clad in gold set on his royal throne,
Gold-crowned, whose hand the ivory sceptre held;
And underneath him sat the Queen alone,
Ringed round with standing lords, of whom not one
Did aught but utmost reverence unto him;
Then did Jovinian shake in every limb.

Yet midst amaze and rage to him it seemed
This man was nowise like him in the face;
But with a marvellous glory his head gleamed,
As though an angel sat in that high place,
Where erst he sat like all his royal race,—
—But their eyes met, and with a stern, calm brow
The shining one cried out, "And where art thou?

"Where art thou, robber of my majesty?"
"Was I not King," he said, "but yesterday?
And though to-day folk give my place to thee,
I am Jovinian; yes, though none gainsay,
If on these very stones thou shouldst me slay,
And though no friend be left for me to moan,
I am Jovinian still, and King alone."

Then said that other, "O thou foolish man,
King was I yesterday, and long before,
Nor is my name aught but Jovinian,
Whom in this house the Queen my mother bore,
Unto my longing father, for right sore
Was I desired before I saw the light;
Thou, fool, art first to speak against my right.

"And surely well thou meritest to die;
Yet ere I bid men lead thee unto death
Hearken to these my lords that stand anigh,
And what this faithful Queen beside me saith;
Then may'st thou many a year hence draw thy breath,
If these should stammer in their speech one whit:
Behold this face, lords, look ye well on it!

"Thou, O fair Queen, say now whose face is this!"
Then cried they, "Hail, O Lord Jovinian,
Long mayst thou live!" and the Queen knelt to kiss
His gold-shod feet, and through her face there ran
Sweet colour, as she said, "Thou art the man
By whose side I have lain for many a year,
Thou art my lord Jovinian lief and dear."

Then said he, "O thou wretch, hear now and see!
What thing should hinder me to slay thee now?
And yet indeed, such mercy is in me,
If thou wilt kneel down humbly and avow
Thou art no king, but base-born, as I know
Thou art indeed, in mine house shalt thou live,
And as thy service is, so shalt thou thrive."

But the unhappy King laughed bitterly,
The red blood rose to flush his visage wan
Where erst the grey of death began to be;
"Thou liest," he said, "I am Jovinian,
Come of great kings; nor am I such a man
As still to live when all delight is gone,
As thou might'st do, who sittest on my throne."

No answer made the other for a while,
But sat and gazed upon him steadfastly,
Until across his face there came a smile,
Where scorn seemed mingled with some great pity.
And then he said, "Nathless thou shalt not die,
But live on as thou mayst, a lowly man,
Forgetting thou wast once Jovinian."

Then wildly round the hall Jovinian gazed,
Turning about to many a well-known face,
But none of all his folk seemed grieved or mazed,
But stood unmoved, each in his wonted place;
There were the Lords, the Marshal with his mace,
The Chamberlain, the Captain of the Guard,
Grey-headed, with his wrinkled face and hard,

That had peered down so many a lane of war;
There stood the grave ambassadors arow,
Come from half-conquered lands; without the bar
The foreign merchants gazed upon the show,
Willing new things of that great land to know;
Nor was there any doubt in any man
That the gold throne still held Jovinian.

Yea, as the sergeants laid their hands on him,
The mighty hound that crouched before the throne,
Flew at him fain to tear him limb from limb,
Though in the woods, the brown bear's dying groan,
He and that beast had often heard alone.
"Ah!" muttered he, "take thou thy wages too,
Worship the risen sun as these men do."

They thrust him out, and as he passed the door,
The murmur of the stately court he heard
Behind him, and soft footfalls on the floor,
And, though by this somewhat his skin was seared,
Hung back, at the rough eager wind afeard;
But from the place they dragged him through the gate,
Wherethrough he oft had rid in royal state.

Then down the streets they led him, where of old,
He, coming back from some well-finished war,
Had seen the line of flashing steel and gold
Wind upwards 'twixt the houses from the bar,
While clashed the bells from wreathed spires afar;
Now moaning, as they haled him on, he said,
"God and the world against one lonely head!"

But soon, the bar being past, they loosed their hold,
And said, "Thus saith by us our Lord the King,
Dwell now in peace, but yet be not so bold
To come again, or to thy lies to cling,
Lest unto thee there fall a worser thing;
And for ourselves we bid thee ever pray
For him who has been good to thee this day."

Therewith they turned away into the town,
And still he wandered on and knew not where,
Till, stumbling at the last, he fell adown,
And looking round beheld a brook right fair,
That ran in pools and shallows here and there,
And on the further side of it a wood,
Nigh which a lowly clay-built hovel stood.

Gazing thereat, it came into his mind
A priest dwelt there, a hermit wise and old,
Whom he had ridden oftentimes to find,
In days when first the sceptre he did hold,
And unto whom his mind he oft had told,
And had good counsel from him, though indeed
A scanty crop had sprung from that good seed.

Therefore he passed the brook with heavy cheer
And toward the little house went speedily,
And at the door knocked, trembling with his fear,
Because he thought, "Will he remember me?
If not, within me must there surely be
Some devil, who turns everything to ill,
And makes my wretched body do his will."

So, while such doleful things as this he thought,
There came unto the door the holy man,
Who said, "Good friend, what tidings hast thou brought?"
"Father," he said, "knowest thou Jovinian?
Know'st thou me not, made naked, poor, and wan?
Alas, O father! am I not the King,
The rightful lord of thee and everything?"

"Nay, thou art mad to tell me such a tale!"
The hermit said; "if thou seek'st soul's health here,
Right little will such words as this avail;
It were a better deed to shrive thee clear,
And take the pardon Christ has bought so dear,
Than to an ancient man such mocks to say
That would be fitter for a Christmas play."

So to his hut he got him back again,
And fell the unhappy King upon his knees,
And unto God at last he did complain,
Saying, "Lord God, what bitter things are these?
What hast thou done, that every man that sees
This wretched body, of my death is fain?
O Lord God, give me back myself again!

"E'en if therewith I needs must die straightway.
Indeed I know that since upon the earth
I first did go, I ever day by day
Have grown the worse, who was of little worth
E'en at the best time since my helpless birth.
And yet it pleased thee once to make me King,
Why hast thou made me now this wretched thing?

"Why am I hated so of every one?
Wilt thou not let me live my life again,
Forgetting all the deeds that I have done,
Forgetting my old name, and honours vain,
That I may cast away this lonely pain?
Yet if thou wilt not, help me in this strife,
That I may pass my little span of life,

"Not made a monster by unhappiness.
What shall I say? thou mad'st me weak of will,
Thou wrapped'st me in ease and carelessness,
And yet, as some folk say, thou lovest me still;
Look down! of folly I have had my fill,
And am but now as first thou madest me,
Weak, yielding clay to take impress of thee."

So said he weeping, and but scarce had done,
When yet again came forth that hermit old,
And said, "Alas! my master and my son,
Is this a dream my wearied eyes behold?
What doleful wonder now shall I be told,

Of that ill world that I so long have left?
What thing thy glory from thee has bereft?"

A strange surprise of joy therewith there came
To that worn heart; he said, "For some great sin
The Lord my God has brought me unto shame;
I am unknown of servants, wife, and kin,
Unknown of all the lords that stand within
My father's house; nor didst thou know me more
When e'en just now I stood before thy door.

"Now since thou know'st me, surely God is good,
And will not slay me, and good hope I have
Of help from Him that died upon the rood,
And is a mighty lord to slay and save:
So now again these blind men will I brave,
If thou wilt give me of thy poorest weed,
And some rough food, the which I sorely need;

"Then of my sins thou straight shalt shrive me clean."
Then weeping said the holy man, "Dear lord,
What heap of woes upon thine head has been;
Enter, O King, take this rough gown and cord,
And what scant food my hovel can afford;
And tell me everything thou hast to say;
And then the High God speed thee on thy way."

So when in coarse serge raiment he was clad,
He told him all that pride had made him think;
And showed him of his life both good and bad;
And then being houselled, did he eat and drink,
While in the wise man's heart his words did sink,
For, "God be praised!" he thought, "I am no king,
Who scarcely shall do right in anything!"

Then he made ready for the King his ass,
And bade again, God speed him on the way,
And down the road the King made haste to pass
As it was growing toward the end of day,
With sober joy for troubles passed away;
But trembling still, as onward he did ride,
Meeting few folk upon that eventide.

So to the city gate being come at last,
He noted there two ancient warders stand,
Whereof one looked askance as he went past,
And whispered low behind his held-up hand
Unto his mate, "The King! who gave command
That if disguised this eve he pass this gate,
No reverence we should do his kingly state."

Thereat with joy, Jovinian smiled again,
And so passed onward quickly down the street;
And well-nigh was he eased of all his pain
When he beheld the folk that he might meet
Gaze hard at him, as though they fain would greet
His well-known face, but durst not, knowing well
He would not any of his state should tell.

Withal unto the palace being come,
He lighted down thereby and enteréd,
And once again it seemed his royal home,
For folk again before him bowed the head;
And to him came a squire, who softly said,
"The Queen awaits thee, O my lord the King,
Within the little hall where minstrels sing,

"Since there thou bad'st her meet thee on this night."
"Lead on then!" said the King, and in his heart
He said, "Perfay all goeth more than right
And I am King again;" but with a start
He thought of him who played the kingly part
That morn, yet said, "If God will have it so
This man like all the rest my face will know."

So in the Little Hall the Queen he found,
Asleep, as one a spell binds suddenly;
For her fair broidery lay upon the ground,
And in her lap her open hand did lie,
The silken-threaded needle close thereby;
And by her stood that image of the King
In rich apparel, crown and signet-ring.

But when the King stepped forth with angry eye
And would have spoken, came a sudden light
And changéd was that other utterly;
For he was clad in robe of shining white,
Inwrought with flowers of unnamed colours bright,
Girt with a marvellous girdle, and whose hem
Fell to his naked feet and shone in them;

And from his shoulders did two wings arise,
That with the swaying of his body, played
This way and that; of strange and lovely dyes
Their feathers were, and wonderfully made:
And now he spoke, "O King, be not dismayed,
Or think my coming here so strange to be,
For oft ere this have I been close to thee.

"And now thou knowest in how short a space
The God that made the world can unmake thee,

And though He alter in no whit thy face,
Can make all folk forget thee utterly,
That thou to-day a nameless wretch mayst be,
Who yesterday woke up without a peer,
The wide world's marvel and the people's fear.

"Behold, thou oughtest to thank God for this,
That on the hither side of thy dark grave
Thou well hast learned how great a God He is
Who from the heavens such countless rebels drave,
Yet turns Himself such folk as thee to save;
For many a man thinks nought at all of it,
Till in a darksome land he comes to sit,

"Lamenting everything: so do not thou!
For inasmuch as thou thoughtst not to die
This thing may happen to thee even now,
Because the day unspeakable draws nigh,
When bathed in unknown flame all things shall lie;
And if thou art upon God's side that day,
Unslain, thine earthly part shall pass away.

"Or if thy body in the grave must rot,
Well mayst thou see how small a thing is this,
Whose pain of yesterday now hurts thee not,
Now thou hast come again to earthly bliss,
Though bitter-sweet thou knowest well this is,
And though no coming day can ever see
Ending of happiness where thou mayst be.

"Now must I go, nor wilt thou see me more
Until the day, when, unto thee at least
This world is gone, and an unmeasured shore,
Where all is wonderful and changed, thou seest:
Therefore, farewell! at council and at feast
Thy nobles shalt thou meet as thou hast done,
Nor wilt thou more be strange to any one."

So scarce had he done speaking, ere his wings
Within the doorway of the hall did gleam,
And then he vanished quite; and all these things
Unto Jovinian little more did seem
Than some distinct and well-remembered dream,
From which one wakes amidst a feverish night,
Taking the moonshine for the morning light.

Silent he stood, not moving for a while,
Pondering o'er all these wondrous things, until
The Queen arose from sleep, and with a smile,
Said, "O fair lord, your great men by your will
E'en as I speak the banquet-chamber fill,
To greet thee amidst joy and revelling,
Wilt thou not therefore meet them as a King?"

So from that place of marvels having gone,
Half mazed, he soon was clad in rich array,
And sat thereafter on his kingly throne,
As though no other had sat there that day;
Nor did a soul of all his household say
A word about the man, who on that morn
Had stood there, naked, helpless, and forlorn.

But ever day by day the thought of it
Within Jovinian's heart the clearer grew,
As o'er his head the ceaseless time did flit,
And everything still towards its ending drew,
New things becoming old, and old things new
Till, when a moment of eternity
Had passed, grey-headed did Jovinian lie

One sweet May morning, wakeful in his bed;
And thought, "That day is thirty years a-gone
Since useless folly came into my head,
Whereby, before the steps of mine own throne,
I stood in helpless agony alone,
And of the wondrous things that there befell,
When I am gone there will be none to tell:

"No man is now alive who thinks that he,
Who bade thrust out the madman on that tide,
Was other than the King they used to see:
Long years have passed now, since the hermit died,
So must I tell the tale, ere by his side
I lie, lest it be unrecorded quite,
Like a forgotten dream in morning light.

"Yea, lest I die ere night come, this same day
Unto some scribe will I tell everything,
That it may lie when I am gone away,
Stored up within the archives of the King;
And may God grant the words thereof may ring
Like His own voice in the next comer's ears!
Whereby his folk shall shed the fewer tears."

So it was done, and at the King's command
A clerk that day did note it every whit,
And after by a man of skilful hand
In golden letters fairly was it writ.
Yet little heed the new King took of it
That filled the throne when King Jovinian died,
So much did all things feed his swelling pride.

But whether God chastised him in his turn,
And he grew wise thereafter, I know not;
I think by eld alone he came to learn
How lowly on some day must be his lot.
But ye, O Kings, think all that ye have got
To be but gawds cast out upon some heap,
And stolen the while the Master was asleep.

THE story done, for want of happier things,
Some men must even fall to talk of kings;
Some trouble of a far-off Grecian isle,
Some hard Sicilian craftsman's cruel guile
Whereby he raised himself to be as God,
Till good men slew him; the fell Persian rod
As blighting as the deadly pestilence,
The brazen net of armèd men from whence
Was no escape; the fir-built Norway hall
Filled with the bonders waiting for the fall
Of the great roof whereto the torch is set;
The laughing mouth, beneath the eyes still wet
With more than sea-spray, as the well-loved land
The freeman still looks back on, while his hand
Clutches the tiller, and the eastern breeze
Grows fresh and fresher: many things like these
They talked about, till they seemed young again,
Remembering what a glory and a gain
Their fathers deemed the death of kings to be.
And yet amidst it, some smiled doubtfully
For thinking how few men escape the yoke,
From this or that man's hand, and how most folk
Must needs be kings and slaves the while they live,
And take from this man, and to that man give
Things hard enow. Yet as they mused, again
The minstrels raised some high heroic strain
That led men on to battle in old times;
And midst the glory of its mingling rhymes,
Their hard hearts softened, and strange thoughts arose
Of some new end to all life's cruel foes.

MAY.

O LOVE, this morn when the sweet nightingale
Had so long finished all he had to say,
That thou hadst slept, and sleep had told his tale;
And midst a peaceful dream had stolen away
In fragrant dawning of the first of May,
Didst thou see aught? didst thou hear voices sing
Ere to the risen sun the bells 'gan ring?

For then methought the Lord of Love went by
To take possession of his flowery throne,
Ringed round with maids, and youths, and minstrelsy;
A little while I sighed to find him gone,
A little while the dawning was alone,
And the light gathered; then I held my breath,
And shuddered at the sight of Eld and Death.

Alas! Love passed me in the twilight dun,
His music hushed the wakening ousel's song;
But on these twain shone out the golden sun,
And o'er their heads the brown bird's tune was strong,
As shivering, 'twixt the trees they stole along;
None noted aught their noiseless passing by,
The world had quite forgotten it must die.

Now must these men be glad a little while
That they had lived to see May once more smile
Upon the earth; wherefore, as men who know
How fast the bad days and the good days go,
They gathered at the feast: the fair abode
Wherein they sat, o'erlooked, across the road
Unhedged green meads, which willowy streams passed through,
And on that morn, before the fresh May dew
Had dried upon the sunniest spot of grass,
From bush to bush did youths and maidens pass
In raiment meet for May apparelled,
Gathering the milk-white blossoms and the red;
And now, with noon long past, and that bright day
Growing aweary, on the sunny way
They wandered, crowned with flowers, and loitering,
And weary, yet were fresh enough to sing
The carols of the morn, and pensive, still
Had cast away their doubt of death and ill,
And flushed with love, no more grew red with shame.

So to the elders as they sat, there came,
With scent of flowers, the murmur of that folk
Wherethrough from time to time a song outbroke,
Till scarce they thought about the story due;
Yet, when anigh to sun-setting it grew,
A book upon the board an elder laid,
And turning from the open window said,
"Too fair a tale the lovely time doth ask,
For this of mine to be an easy task,
Yet in what words soever this is writ,
As for the matter, I dare say of it
That it is lovely as the lovely May;
Pass then the manner, since the learned say
No written record was there of the tale,
Ere we from our fair land of Greece set sail;
How this may be I know not, this I know
That such-like tales the wind would seem to blow
From place to place, e'en as the feathery seed
Is borne across the sea to help the need
Of barren isles; so, sirs, from seed thus sown,
This flower, a gift from other lands has grown.

THE STORY OF CUPID AND PSYCHE.

ARGUMENT.

Psyche, a king's daughter, by her exceeding beauty caused the people to forget Venus; therefore the goddess would fain have destroyed her: nevertheless she became the bride of Love, yet in an unhappy moment lost him by her own fault, and wandering through the world, suffered many evils at the hands of Venus, for whom she must accomplish fearful tasks. But the gods and all nature helped her, and in process of time she was reunited to Love, forgiven by Venus, and made immortal by the Father of gods and men.

IN the Greek land of old there was a King
Happy in battle, rich in everything;
Most rich in this, that he a daughter had
Whose beauty made the longing city glad.
She was so fair, that strangers from the sea
Just landed, in the temples thought that she
Was Venus visible to mortal eyes,
New come from Cyprus for a world's surprise.
She was so beautiful that had she stood
On windy Ida by the oaken wood,
And bared her limbs to that bold shepherd's gaze,
Troy might have stood till now with happy days;
And those three fairest, all have left the land
And left her with the apple in her hand.

And Psyche is her name in stories old,
As ever by our fathers we were told.

All this beheld Queen Venus from her throne,
And felt that she no longer was alone
In beauty, but, if only for a while,
This maiden matched her god-enticing smile;
Therefore, she wrought in such a wise, that she,
If honoured as a goddess, certainly
Was dreaded as a goddess none the less,
And midst her wealth, dwelt long in loneliness.
Two sisters had she, and men deemed them fair,
But as King's daughters might be anywhere,
And these to men of name and great estate
Were wedded, while at home must Psyche wait.
The sons of kings before her silver feet
Still bowed, and sighed for her; in measures sweet
The minstrels to the people sung her praise,
Yet must she live a virgin all her days.

So to Apollo's fane her father sent,
Seeking to know the dreadful Gods' intent,
And therewith sent he goodly gifts of price,
A silken veil, wrought with a paradise,
Three golden bowls, set round with many a gem,
Three silver robes, with gold in every hem,
And a fair ivory image of the god
That underfoot a golden serpent trod;
And when three lords with these were gone away,
Nor could return until the fortieth day,
Ill was the King at ease, and neither took
Joy in the chase, or in the pictured book
The skilled Athenian limner had just wrought,
Nor in the golden cloths from India brought.
At last the day came for those lords' return,
And then 'twixt hope and fear the King did burn,
As on his throne with great pomp he was set,
And by him Psyche, knowing not as yet
Why they had gone: thus waiting, at noontide
They in the palace heard a voice outside,
And soon the messengers came hurrying,
And with pale faces knelt before the King,
And rent their clothes, and each man on his head
Cast dust, the while a trembling courtier read
This scroll, wherein the fearful answer lay,
Whereat from every face joy passed away.

THE ORACLE.

O FATHER of a most unhappy maid,
O King, whom all the world henceforth shall know
As wretched among wretches, be afraid
To ask the gods thy misery to show,
But if thou needs must hear it, to thy woe,
Take back thy gifts to feast thine eyes upon,
When thine own flesh and blood some beast hath won.

"For hear thy doom! a rugged rock there is
Set back a league from thine own palace fair,
There leave the maid, that she may wait the kiss
Of the fell monster that doth harbour there:
This is the mate for whom her yellow hair
And tender limbs have been so fashionéd,
This is the pillow for her lovely head.

"O what an evil from thy loins shall spring,
For all the world this monster overturns,
He is the bane of every mortal thing,
And this world ruined, still for more he yearns;
A fire there goeth from his mouth that burns
Worse than the flame of Phlegethon the red—
To such a monster shall thy maid be wed.

"And if thou sparest now to do this thing,
I will destroy thee and thy land also,
And of dead corpses shalt thou be the King,
And stumbling through the dark land shalt thou go,
Howling for second death to end thy woe.
Live therefore as thou mayst and do my will,
And be a King that men may envy still."

What man was there, whose face changed not for grief
At hearing this? Psyche, shrunk like the leaf
The autumn frost first touches on the tree,
Stared round about with eyes that could not see,
And muttered sounds from lips that said no word,
And still within her ears the sentence heard
When all was said and silence fell on all
'Twixt marble columns and adornéd wall.
Then spoke the King, bowed down with misery:
"What help is left! O daughter, let us die,
Or else together fleeing from this land,
From town to town go wandering hand in hand
Thou and I, daughter, till all men forget
That ever on a throne I have been set,
And then, when houseless and disconsolate,
We ask an alms before some city gate,
The gods perchance a little gift may give,
And suffer thee and me like beasts to live."
Then answered Psyche, through her bitter tears,
"Alas! my father, I have known these years
That with some woe the gods have dowered me,
And weighed 'gainst riches infelicity;
Ill is it then against the gods to strive;
Live on, O father! those that are alive
May still be happy; would it profit me
To live awhile, and ere I died to see
Thee perish, and all folk who love me well,
And then at last be dragged myself to hell
Cursed of all men? nay, since all things must die,
And I have dreamed not of eternity,
Why weepest thou that I must die to-day?
Why weepest thou? cast thought of shame away,
The dead are not ashamed, they feel no pain;
I have heard folk who spoke of death as gain—
And yet—ah, God, if I had been some maid,
Toiling all day, and in the night-time laid
Asleep on rushes—had I only died
Before this sweet life I had fully tried,
Upon that day when for my birth men sung,
And o'er the feasting folk the sweet bells rung."

And therewith she arose and gat away
And in her chamber, mourning long she lay,
Thinking of all the days that might have been,
And how that she was born to be a queen,
The prize of some great conqueror of renown,
The joy of many a country and fair town,
The high desire of every prince and lord,
One who could fright with careless smile or word
The hearts of heroes fearless in the war,
The glory of the world, the leading-star
Unto all honour and all earthly fame—
—Round goes the wheel, and death and deadly shame
Shall be her lot, while yet of her men sing
Unwitting that the gods have done this thing.
Long time she lay there, while the sunbeams moved
Over her body through the flowers she loved;
And in the eaves the sparrows chirped outside,
Until for weariness she grew dry-eyed,
And into an unhappy sleep she fell.

But of the luckless King now must we tell,
Who sat devising means to 'scape that shame,
Until the frightened people thronging came
About the palace, and drove back the guards,
Making their way past all the gates and wards;
And, putting chamberlains and marshals by,
Surged round the very throne tumultuously.
Then knew the wretched King all folk had heard
The miserable sentence, and the word
The gods had spoken; and from out his seat
He rose, and spoke in humble words, unmeet
For a great King, and prayed them give him grace,
While 'twixt his words the tears ran down his face
On to his raiment stiff with golden thread.
But little heeded they the words he said,
For very fear had made them pitiless;
Nor cared they for the maid and her distress,
But clashed their spears together and 'gan cry:
"For one man's daughter shall the people die,
And this fair land become an empty name,
Because thou art afraid to meet the shame
Wherewith the gods reward thy hidden sin?
Nay, by their glory do us right herein!"
"Ye are in haste to have a poor maid slain,"
The King said; "but my will herein is vain,

For ye are many, I one aged man:
Let one man speak, if for his shame he can."
Then stepped a sturdy dyer forth, who said,—
"Fear of the gods brings no shame, by my head.
Listen; thy daughter we would have thee leave
Upon the fated mountain this same eve;
And thither must she go right well arrayed
In marriage raiment, loose hair as a maid,
And saffron veil, and with her shall there go
Fair maidens bearing torches, two and two;
And minstrels, in such raiment as is meet
The god-ordainéd fearful spouse to greet.
So shalt thou save our wives and little ones,
And something better than a heap of stones,
Dwelt in by noisesome things, this town shall be,
And thou thyself shalt keep thy sovereignty;
But if thou wilt not do the thing I say,
Then shalt thou live in bonds from this same day,
And we will bear thy maid unto the hill,
And from the dread gods save the city still."
Then loud they shouted at the words he said,
And round the head of the unhappy maid,
Dreaming uneasily of long-past joys,
Floated the echo of that dreadful noise,
And changed her dreams to dreams of misery.
But when the King knew that the thing must be
And that no help there was in this distress,
He bade them have all things in readiness
To take the maiden out at sun-setting,
And wed her to the unknown dreadful thing.
So through the palace passed with heavy cheer
Her women gathering the sad wedding gear;
Who lingering long, yet at the last must go,
To waken Psyche to her bitter woe.
So coming to her bower, they found her there,
From head to foot rolled in her yellow hair,
As in the saffron veil she should be soon
Betwixt the setting sun and rising moon;
But when above her a pale maiden bent
And touched her, from her heart a sigh she sent,
And waking, on their woeful faces stared,
Sitting upright, with one white shoulder bared
By writhing on the bed in wretchedness.
Then suddenly remembering her distress,
She bowed her head, and 'gan to weep and wail,
But let them wrap her in the bridal veil,
And bind the sandals to her silver feet,
And set the rose-wreath on her tresses sweet;
But spoke no word, yea, rather, wearily
Turned from the yearning face and pitying eye
Of any maid who seemed about to speak.
Now through the garden trees the sun 'gan break,
And that inevitable time drew near;
Then through the courts, grown cruel, strange, and drear,
Since the bright morn, they led her to the gate,
Where she beheld a golden litter wait.
Whereby the King stood, aged and bent to earth,
The flute-players with faces void of mirth,
The downcast bearers of the ivory wands,
The maiden torch-bearers' unhappy bands.

So then was Psyche taken to the hill,
And through the town the streets were void and still;
For in their houses all the people stayed,
Of that most mournful music sore afraid.
But on the way a marvel did they see,
For, passing by, where wrought of ivory,
There stood the Goddess of the flowery isle,
All folk could see the carven image smile.
But when anigh the hill's bare top they came,
Where Psyche must be left to meet her shame,
They set the litter down, and drew aside
The golden curtains from the wretched bride,
Who at their bidding rose and with them went
Afoot amidst her maids with head down-bent,
Until they came unto the drear rock's brow;
And there she stood apart, not weeping now,
But pale as privet blossom is in June.
There as the quivering flutes left off their tune,
In trembling arms the weeping, haggard King
Caught Psyche, who, like some half-lifeless thing,
Took all his kisses, and no word could say,
Until at last perforce he turned away;
Because the longest agony has end,
And homeward through the twilight did they wend.

But Psyche, now faint and bewilderéd,
Remembered little of her pain and dread;
Her doom drawn nigh took all her fear away,
And left her faint and weary; as they say
It haps to one who 'neath a lion lies,
Who stunned and helpless feels not ere he dies
The horror of the yellow fell, the red
Hot mouth, and white teeth gleaming o'er his head;
So Psyche felt, as sinking on the ground
She cast one weary vacant look around,
And at the ending of that wretched day
Swooning beneath the risen moon she lay.

Now backward must our story go awhile
And unto Cyprus the fair flowery isle,
Where hid away from every worshipper
Was Venus sitting, and her son by her
Standing to mark what words she had to say,
While in his dreadful wings the wind did play:
Frowning she spoke, in plucking from her thigh
The fragrant flowers that clasped it lovingly.

"In such a town, O son, a maid there is
Whom any amorous man this day would kiss
As gladly as a goddess like to me,
And though I know an end to this must be,
When white and red and gold are waxen grey
Down on the earth, while unto me one day
Is as another; yet behold, my son,
And go through all my temples one by one
And look what incense rises unto me;
Hearken the talk of sailors from the sea
Just landed, ever will it be the same,
'Hast thou then seen her?'—Yea, unto my shame
Within the temple that is calléd mine,
As through the veil I watched the altar shin
This happed; a man with outstretched hand there
stood,
Glittering in arms, of smiling joyous mood,
With crisp, black hair, and such a face one sees
But seldom now, and limbs like Hercules;
But as he stood there in my holy place,
Across mine image came the maiden's face,
And when he saw her, straight the warrior said
Turning about unto an earthly maid,
'O, lady Venus, thou art kind to me
After so much of wandering on the sea
To show thy very body to me here,'
But when this impious saying I did hear,
I sent them a great portent, for straightway
I quenched the fire, and no priest on that day
Could light it any more for all his prayer.
"So must she fall, so must her golden hair
Flash no more through the city, or her feet
Be seen like lilies moving down the street;
No more must men watch her soft raiment cling
About her limbs, no more must minstrels sing
The praises of her arms and hidden breast.
And thou it is, my son, must give me rest
From all this worship wearisomely paid
Unto a mortal who should be afraid
To match the gods in beauty; take thy bow
And dreadful arrows, and about her sow
The seeds of folly, and with such an one
I pray thee cause her mingle, fair my son,
That not the poorest peasant girl in Greece
Would look on for the gift of Jason's fleece.
Do this, and see thy mother glad again,
And free from insult, in her temples reign
Over the hearts of lovers in the spring."

"Mother," he said, "thou askest no great
thing,
Some wretch too bad for death I soon shall find,
Who round her perfect neck his arms shall wind.
She shall be driven from the palace gate
Where once her crowd of worshippers would wait
From earliest morning till the dew was dry
On chance of seeing her gold gown glancing by;
There through the storm of curses shall she go
In evil raiment midst the winter snow,
Or in the summer in rough sheepskins clad.
And thus, O mother, shall I make thee glad
Remembering all the honour thou hast brought
Unto mine altars; since as thine own thought
My thought is grown, my mind as thy dear mind.

Then straight he rose from earth and down the
wind
Went glittering 'twixt the blue sky and the sea,
And so unto the place came presently
Where Psyche dwelt, and through the gardens fair
Passed seeking her, and as he wandered there
Had still no thought but to do all her will,
Nor cared to think if it were good or ill:
So beautiful and pitiless he went,
And toward him still the blossomed fruit-trees leant,
And after him the wind crept murmuring,
And on the boughs the birds forgot to sing.

Withal at last amidst a fair green close,
Hedged round about with woodbine and red rose,
Within the flicker of a white-thorn shade
In gentle sleep he found the maiden laid;
One hand that held a book had fallen away
Across her body, and the other lay
Upon a marble fountain's plashing rim,
Among whose broken waves the fish showed dim,
But yet its wide-flung spray now woke her not,
Because the summer day at noon was hot,
And all sweet sounds and scents were lulling her.
So soon the rustle of his wings 'gan stir
Her looser folds of raiment, and the hair
Spread wide upon the grass and daisies fair,
As Love cast down his eyes with a half smile
Godlike and cruel; that faded in a while,
And long he stood above her hidden eyes
With red lips parted in a god's surprise.
Then very Love knelt down beside the maid
And on her breast a hand unfelt he laid,
And drew the gown from off her dainty feet,
And set his fair cheek to her shoulder sweet,
And kissed her lips that knew of no love yet,
And wondered if his heart would e'er forget
The perfect arm that o'er her body lay.

But now by chance a damsel came that way,
One of her ladies, and saw not the god,
Yet on his shafts cast down had well-nigh trod
In wakening Psyche, who rose up in haste
And girded up her gown about her waist,
And with that maid went drowsily away.

From place to place Love followed her that day
And ever fairer to his eyes she grew,
So that at last when from her bower he flew,

And underneath his feet the moonlit sea
Went shepherding his waves disorderly,
He swore that of all gods and men, no one
Should hold her in his arms but he alone;
That she should dwell with him in glorious wise
Like to a goddess in some paradise;
Yea, he would get from Father Jove this grace
That she should never die, but her sweet face
And wonderful fair body should endure
Till the foundations of the mountains sure
Were molten in the sea; so utterly
Did he forget his mother's cruelty.

And now that he might come to this fair end,
He found Apollo, and besought him lend
His throne of divination for a while,
Whereby he did the priestess there beguile,
To give the cruel answer ye have heard
Unto those lords, who wrote it word by word,
And back unto the King its threatenings bore,
Whereof there came that grief and mourning sore,
Of which ye wot; thereby is Psyche laid
Upon the mountain-top; thereby, afraid
Of some ill yet, within the city fair
Cower down the people that have sent her there.

Withal did Love call unto him the Wind
Called Zephyrus, who most was to his mind,
And said, "O rainy wooer of the spring,
I pray thee, do for me an easy thing;
To such a hill-top go, O gentle Wind,
And there a sleeping maiden shalt thou find;
Her perfect body in thine arms with care
Take up, and unto the green valley bear
That lies before my noble house of gold;
There leave her lying on the daisies cold."
Then, smiling, toward the place the fair Wind went,
While 'neath his wing the sleeping lilies bent,
And flying 'twixt the green earth and the sea
Made the huge anchored ships dance merrily,
And swung round from the east the gilded vanes
On many a palace, and from unhorsed wains
Twitched off the wheat-straw in his hurried flight;
But ere much time had passed, he came in sight
Of Psyche laid in swoon upon the hill,
And smiling, set himself to do Love's will;
For in his arms he took her up with care,
Wondering to see a mortal made so fair,
And came into the vale in little space,
And set her down in the most flowery place;
And then unto the plains of Thessaly
Went, ruffling up the edges of the sea.

Now underneath the world the moon was gone,
But brighter shone the stars so left alone,
Until a faint green light began to show
Far in the east, whereby did all men know,
Who lay awake either with joy or pain,
That day was coming on their heads again;
Then widening, soon it spread to grey twilight,
And in a while with gold the east was bright;
The birds burst out a-singing one by one,
And o'er the hill-top rose the mighty sun.
Therewith did Psyche open wide her eyes,
And rising on her arm, with great surprise
Gazed on the flowers wherein so deep she lay,
And wondered why upon that dawn of day
Out in the fields she had lift up her head
Rather than in her balmy gold-hung bed.
Then, suddenly remembering all her woes,
She sprang upon her feet, and yet arose
Within her heart a mingled hope and dread
Of some new thing: and now she raised her head,
And gazing round about her timidly,
A lovely grassy valley could she see,
That steep grey cliffs upon three sides did bound,
And under these, a river sweeping round,
With gleaming curves the valley did embrace,
And seemed to make an island of that place;
And all about were dotted leafy trees,
The elm for shade, the linden for the bees,
The noble oak, long ready for the steel
Which in that place it had no fear to feel;
The pomegranate, the apple, and the pear,
That fruit and flowers at once made shift to bear,
Nor yet decayed therefor; and in them hung
Bright birds that elsewhere sing not, but here sung
As sweetly as the small brown nightingales
Within the wooded, deep Laconian vales.
But right across the vale, from side to side,
A high white wall all further view did hide,
But that above it, vane and pinnacle
Rose up, of some great house beyond to tell;
And still betwixt these, mountains far away
Against the sky rose shadowy, cold, and grey.

She, standing in the yellow morning sun,
Could scarcely think her happy life was done,
Or that the place was made for misery;
Yea, some lone heaven it rather seemed to be,
Which for the coming band of gods did wait;
Hope touched her heart; no longer desolate,
Deserted of all creatures did she feel,
And o'er her face sweet colour 'gan to steal,
That deepened to a flush, as wandering thought
Desires before unknown unto her brought,
So mighty was the God, though far away.
But trembling midst her hope, she took her way
Unto a little door midmost the wall,
And still on odorous flowers her feet did fall,
And round about her did the strange birds sing,
Praising her beauty in their carolling.

Thus coming to the door, when now her hand
First touched the lock, in doubt she needs must stand,
And to herself she said, "Lo, here the trap!
And yet, alas! whatever now may hap,
How can I 'scape the ill which waiteth me?
Let me die now!" and herewith, tremblingly,
She raised the latch, and her sweet sinless eyes
Beheld a garden like a paradise,
Void of mankind, fairer than words can say,
Wherein did joyous harmless creatures play
After their kind, and all amidst the trees
Were strange-wrought founts and wondrous images;
And glimmering 'twixt the boughs could she behold
A house made beautiful with beaten gold,
Whose open doors in the bright sun did gleam;
Lonely, but not deserted did it seem.
Long time she stood debating what to do,
But at the last she passed the wicket through,
Which, shutting clamorously behind her, sent
A pang of fear throughout her as she went;
But when through all that green place she had passed,
And by the palace porch she stood at last,
And saw how wonderfully the wall was wrought,
With curious stones from far-off countries brought,
And many an image and fair history
Of what the world has been, and yet shall be,
And all set round with golden craftsmanship,
Well-wrought as some renowned cup's royal lip,
She had a thought again to turn aside:
And yet again, not knowing where to bide,
She entered softly, and with trembling hands
Holding her gown; the wonder of all lands
Met there the wonders of the land and sea.

Now went she through the chambers tremblingly,
And oft in going would she pause and stand,
And drop the gathered raiment from her hand,
Stilling the beating of her heart for fear
As voices whispering low she seemed to hear,
But then again the wind it seemed to be
Moving the golden hangings doubtfully,
Or some bewildered swallow passing close
Unto the pane, or some wind-beaten rose.
Soon seeing that no evil thing came near,
A little she began to lose her fear,
And gaze upon the wonders of the place,
And in the silver mirrors saw her face
Grown strange to her amidst that loneliness,
And stooped to feel the web her feet did press,
Wrought by the brown slim-fingered Indian's toil
Amidst the years of war and vain turmoil;
Or she the figures of the hangings felt,
Or daintily the unknown blossoms smelt,
Or stood and pondered what new thing might mean
The images of knight and king and queen
Wherewith the walls were pictured here and there,
Or touched rich vessels with her fingers fair,
And o'er her delicate smooth cheek would pass
The long-fixed bubbles of strange works of glass:
So wandered she amidst these marvels new
Until anigh the noontide now it grew.
At last she came unto a chamber cool
Paved cunningly in manner of a pool,
Where red fish seemed to swim through floating weed
And at the first she thought it so indeed,
And took the sandals quickly from her feet,
But when the glassy floor these did but meet
The shadow of a long-forgotten smile
Her anxious face a moment did beguile;
And crossing o'er, she found a table spread
With dainty food; as delicate white bread
And fruits piled up, and covered savoury meat,
As though a king were coming there to eat,
For the worst vessel was of beaten gold.
Now when these dainties Psyche did behold
She fain had eaten, but did nowise dare,
Thinking she saw a god's feast lying there.
But as she turned to go the way she came
She heard a low soft voice call out her name,
Then she stood still, and trembling gazed around,
And seeing no man, nigh sank upon the ground:
Then through the empty air she heard the voice.

"O, lovely one, fear not! rather rejoice
That thou art come unto thy sovereignty:
Sit now and eat; this feast is but for thee,
Yea, do whatso thou wilt with all things here,
And in thine own house cast away thy fear,
For all is thine, and little things are these
So loved a heart as thine, awhile to please.
"Be patient! thou art loved by such an one
As will not leave thee mourning here alone,
But rather cometh on this very night;
And though he needs must hide him from thy sight
Yet all his words of love thou well mayst hear,
And pour thy woes into no careless ear.
"Bethink thee then, with what solemnity
Thy folk, thy father, did deliver thee
To him who loves thee thus, and void of dread
Remember, sweet, thou art a bride new-wed."

Now hearing this, did Psyche, trembling sore,
And yet with lighter heart than heretofore,
Sit down and eat, till she grew scarce afeard;
And nothing but the summer noise she heard
Within the garden, then, her meal being done,
Within the window-seat she watched the sun
Changing the garden-shadows, till she grew
Fearless and happy, since she deemed she knew
The worst that could befall, while still the best
Shone a fair star far off: and mid the rest

This brought her after all her grief and fear,
She said, "How sweet it would be, could I hear,
Soft music mate the drowsy afternoon,
And drown awhile the bees' sad murmuring tune
Within these flowering limes." E'en as she spoke,
A sweet-voiced choir of unknown unseen folk
Singing to words that match the sense of these
Hushed the faint music of the linden trees.

SONG.

O PENSIVE, tender maid, downcast and shy,
Who turnest pale e'en at the name of love,
And with flushed face must pass the elm-tree by,
Ashamed to hear the passionate grey dove
Moan to his mate, thee too the god shall move,
Thee too the maidens shall ungird one day,
And with thy girdle put thy shame away.

What then, and shall white winter ne'er be done
Because the glittering frosty morn is fair?
Because against the early-setting sun
Bright show the gilded boughs, though waste and bare?
Because the robin singeth free from care?
Ah! these are memories of a better day
When on earth's face the lips of summer lay.

Come then, beloved one, for such as thee
Love loveth, and their hearts he knoweth well,
Who hoard their moments of felicity,
As misers hoard the medals that they tell,
Lest on the earth but paupers they should dwell:
"We hide our love to bless another day;
The world is hard, youth passes quick," they say.

Ah, little ones, but if ye could forget
Amidst your outpoured love that you must die,
Then ye, my servants, were death's conquerors yet,
And love to you should be eternity,
How quick soever might the days go by:
Yes, ye are made immortal on the day
Ye cease the dusty grains of time to weigh.

Thou hearkenest, love? O, make no semblance then
That thou art loved, but as thy custom is
Turn thy grey eyes away from eyes of men.
With hands down-dropped, that tremble with thy bliss,
With hidden eyes, take thy first lover's kiss;
Call this eternity which is to-day,
Nor dream that this our love can pass away.

They ceased, and Psyche pondering o'er their song,
Not fearing now that aught would do her wrong,
About the chambers wandered at her will,
And on the many marvels gazed her fill,
Where'er she passed still noting everything;
Then in the gardens heard the new birds sing
And watched the red fish in the fountains play,
And at the very faintest time of day
Upon the grass lay sleeping for a while
Midst heaven-sent dreams of bliss that made her smile;
And when she woke the shades were lengthening,
So to the place where she had heard them sing
She came again, and through a little door
Entered a chamber with a marble floor,
Open a-top unto the outer air,
Beneath which lay a bath of water fair,
Paved with strange stones and figures of bright gold,
And from the steps thereof could she behold
The slim-leaved trees against the evening sky
Golden and calm, still moving languidly.
So for a time upon the brink she sat,
Debating in her mind of this and that,
And then arose and slowly from her cast
Her raiment, and adown the steps she passed
Into the water, and therein she played,
Till of herself at last she grew afraid,
And of the broken image of her face,
And the loud splashing in that lonely place.
So from the bath she gat her quietly,
And clad herself in whatso haste might be;
And when at last she was apparelled
Unto a chamber came, where was a bed
Of gold and ivory, and precious wood
Some island bears where never man has stood;
And round about hung curtains of delight,
Wherein were interwoven Day and Night
Joined by the hands of Love, and round their wings
Knots of fair flowers no earthly May-time brings.
Strange for its beauty was the coverlet,
With birds and beasts and flowers wrought over it;
And every cloth was made in daintier wise
Than any man on earth could well devise:
Yea, there such beauty was in everything,
That she, the daughter of a mighty king,
Felt strange therein, and trembled lest that she,
Deceived by dreams, had wandered heedlessly
Into a bower for some fair goddess made.
Yet if perchance some man had thither strayed,
It had been long ere he had noted aught
But her sweet face, made pensive by the thought
Of all the wonders that she moved in there.
But looking round, upon a table fair
She saw a book wherein old tales were writ,
And by the window sat, to read in it
Until the dusk had melted into night,

When waxen tapers did her servants light
With unseen hands, until it grew like day.
And so at last upon the bed she lay,
And slept a dreamless sleep for weariness,
Forgetting all the wonder and distress.

But at the dead of night she woke, and heard
A rustling noise, and grew right sore afeard,
Yea, could not move a finger for affright;
And all was darker now than darkest night.

Withal a voice close by her did she hear.
"Alas, my love! why tremblest thou with fear,
While I am trembling with new happiness?
Forgive me, sweet, thy terror and distress:
Not otherwise could this our meeting be.
O loveliest! such bliss awaiteth thee,
For all thy trouble and thy shameful tears,
Such nameless honour, and such happy years,
As fall not unto women of the earth.
Loved as thou art, thy short-lived pains are worth
The glory and the joy unspeakable
Wherein the Treasure of the World shall dwell:
A little hope, a little patience yet,
Ere everything thou wilt, thou may'st forget,
Or else remember as a well-told tale,
That for some pensive pleasure may avail.
Canst thou not love me, then, who wrought thy woe,
That thou the height and depth of joy mightst know?"

He spoke, and as upon the bed she lay,
Trembling amidst new thoughts, he sent a ray
Of finest love unto her inmost heart,
Till, murmuring low, she strove the night to part,
And like a bride who meets her love at last,
When the long days of yearning are o'erpast,
She reached to him her perfect arms unseen,
And said, "O Love, how wretched I have been!
What hast thou done?" And by her side he lay,
Till just before the dawning of the day.

THE sun was high when Psyche woke again,
And turning to the place where he had lain
And seeing no one, doubted of the thing
That she had dreamed it, till a fair gold ring,
Unseen before, upon her hand she found,
And touching her bright head she felt it crowned
With a bright circlet; then withal she sighed,
And wondered how the oracle had lied,
And wished her father knew it, and straightway
Rose up and clad herself. Slow went the day,
Though helped with many a solace, till came night;
And therewithal the new, unseen delight,
She learned to call her Love.

So passed away
The days and nights, until upon a day
As in the shade, at noon she lay asleep,
She dreamed that she beheld her sisters weep,
And her old father clad in sorry guise,
Grown foolish with the weight of miseries;
Her friends black-clad and moving mournfully;
And folk in wonder landed from the sea,
At such a fall of such a matchless maid;
And in some press apart her raiment laid
Like precious relics, and an empty tomb
Set in the palace telling of her doom.
Therefore she wept in sleep, and woke with tears
Still on her face, and wet hair round her ears,
And went about unhappily that day,
Framing a gentle speech wherewith to pray
For leave to see her sisters once again,
That they might know her happy, and her pain
Turned all to joy, and honour come from shame.
And so at last night and her lover came,
And midst their fondling, suddenly she said,
"O Love, a little time we have been wed,
And yet I ask a boon of thee this night."
"Psyche," he said, "if my heart tells me right,
This thy desire may bring us bitter woe,
For who the shifting chance of fate can know?
Yet, forasmuch as mortal hearts are weak,
To-morrow shall my folk thy sisters seek,
And bear them hither; but before the day
Is fully ended must they go away.
And thou—beware—for, fresh and good and true,
Thou knowest not what worldly hearts may do,
Or what a curse gold is unto the earth.
Beware, lest from thy full heart, in thy mirth,
Thou tell'st the story of thy love unseen:
Thy loving, simple heart, fits not a queen."
Then by her kisses did she know he frowned,
But close about him her fair arms she wound,
Until for happiness he 'gan to smile,
And in those arms forgat all else awhile.

So the next day, for joy that they should come,
Would Psyche further deck her strange new home,
And even as she 'gan to think the thought,
Quickly her will by unseen hands was wrought,
Who came and went like thoughts. Yea, how should I
Tell of the works of gold and ivory,
The gems and images, those hands brought there
The prisoned things of earth, and sea, and air,
They brought to please their mistress? Many a beast,
Such as King Bacchus in his reckless feast

Makes merry with—huge elephants, snow-white
With gilded tusks, or dusky-grey with bright
And shining chains about their wrinkled necks;
The mailed rhinoceros, that of nothing recks;
Dusky-maned lions; spotted leopards fair
That through the cane-brake move, unseen as air;
The deep-mouthed tiger, dread of the brown man;
The eagle, and the peacock, and the swan—
—These be the nobles of the birds and beasts.
But therewithal, for laughter at their feasts,
They brought them the gods' jesters, such as be
Quick-chattering apes, that yet in mockery
Of anxious men wrinkle their ugly brows;
Strange birds with pouches, birds with beaks like prows
Of merchant-ships, with tufted crests like threads,
With unimaginable monstrous heads.
Lo, such as these, in many a gilded cage
They brought, or chained for fear of sudden rage.
Then strewed they scented branches on the floor,
And hung rose-garlands up by the great door,
And wafted incense through the bowers and halls,
And hung up fairer hangings on the walls,
And filled the baths with water fresh and clear,
And in the chambers laid apparel fair,
And spread a table for a royal feast.
Then when from all these labours they had ceased,
Psyche they sung to sleep with lullabies;
Who slept not long, but opening soon her eyes,
Beheld her sisters on the threshold stand:
Then did she run to take them by the hand,
And laid her cheek to theirs, and murmured words
Of little meaning, like the moan of birds,
While they bewildered stood and gazed around,
Like people who in some strange land have found
One that they thought not of; but she at last
Stood back, and from her face the strayed locks cast,
And, smiling through her tears, said, "Ah, that ye
Should have to weep such useless tears for me!
Alas, the burden that the city bears
For nought! O me, my father's burning tears,
That into all this honour I am come!
Nay, does he live yet? Is the ancient home
Still standing? do the galleys throng the quays?
Do the brown Indians glitter down the ways
With rubies as of old? Yes, yes, ye smile,
For ye are thinking, but a little while
Apart from these has she been dwelling here;
Truly, yet long enough, loved ones and dear,
To make me other than I was of old,
Though now when your dear faces I behold
Am I myself again. But by what road
Have ye been brought to this my new abode?"
"Sister," said one, "I rose up from my bed
It seems this morn, and being apparelled,
And walking in my garden, in a swoon
Helpless and unattended I sank down;
Wherefrom I scarce am waked, for as a dream
Dost thou with all this royal glory seem,
But for thy kisses and thy words, O love."
"Yea, Psyche," said the other, "as I drove
The ivory shuttle through the shuttle-race,
All was changed suddenly, and in this place
I found myself, and standing on my feet,
Where me with sleepy words this one did greet.
Now, sister, tell us whence these wonders come
With all the godlike splendour of your home."

"Sisters," she said, "more marvels shall ye see
When ye have been a little while with me,
Whereof I cannot tell you more than this
That 'midst them all I dwell in ease and bliss,
Well loved and wedded to a mighty lord,
Fair beyond measure, from whose loving word
I know that happier days await me yet.
But come, my sisters, let us now forget
To seek for empty knowledge; ye shall take
Some little gifts for your lost sister's sake;
And whatso wonders ye may see or hear
Of nothing frightful have ye any fear."
Wondering they went with her, and looking round,
Each in the other's eyes a strange look found;
For these, her mother's daughters, had no part
In her divine fresh singleness of heart,
But longing to be great, remembered not
How short a time one heart on earth has got.
But keener still that guarded look now grew
As more of that strange lovely place they knew,
And as with growing hate, but still afeard,
The unseen choirs' heart-softening strains they heard,
Which did but harden these; and when at noon
They sought the shaded waters' freshening boon,
And all unhidden once again they saw
That peerless beauty, free from any flaw,
Which now at last had won its precious meed,
Her kindness then but fed the fire of greed
Within their hearts—her gifts, the rich attire
Wherewith she clad them, where like sparks of fire
The many-coloured gems shone midst the pearls,
The soft silks' winding lines, the work of girls
By the Five Rivers; their fair marvellous crowns,
Their sandals' fastenings worth the rent of towns,
Zones and carved rings, and nameless wonders fair;
All things her faithful slaves had brought them there,
Given amid kisses, made them not more glad;
Since in their hearts the ravening worm they had
That love slays not, nor yet is satisfied
While aught but he has aught; yet still they tried

To look as they deemed loving folk should look,
And still with words of love her bounty took.

So at the last all being apparelléd,
Her sisters to the banquet Psyche led,
Fair were they, and each seemed a glorious queen
With all that wondrous daintiness beseen,
But Psyche clad in gown of dusky blue
Little adorned, with deep grey eyes that knew
The hidden marvels of Love's holy fire,
Seemed like the soul of innocent desire,
Shut from the mocking world, wherefrom those twain
Seemed come to lure her thence with labour vain.

Now having reached the place where they should eat,
Ere 'neath the canopy the three took seat,
The eldest sister unto Psyche said,
"And he, dear love, the man that thou hast wed,
Will he not wish to-day thy kin to see?
Then could we tell of thy felicity
The better, to our folk and father dear."
Then Psyche reddened, "Nay, he is not here,"
She stammered, "neither will be here to-day,
For mighty matters keep him far away."
"Alas!" the younger sister said, "Say then,
What is the likeness of this first of men;
What sayest thou about his loving eyne,
Are his locks black, or golden-red as thine?"
"Black-haired like me," said Psyche stammering,
And looking round, "what say I? like the king
Who rules the world, he seems to me at least—
Come, sisters, sit, and let us make good feast!
My darling and my love ye shall behold
I doubt not soon, his crispy hair of gold,
His eyes unseen; and ye shall hear his voice,
That in my joy ye also may rejoice."

Then did they hold their peace, although indeed
Her stammering haste they did not fail to heed.
But at their wondrous royal feast they sat
Thinking their thoughts, and spoke of this or that
Between the bursts of music, until when
The sun was leaving the abodes of men;
And then must Psyche to her sisters say
That she was bid, her husband being away,
To suffer none at night to harbour there,
No, not the mother that her body bare
Or father that begat her; therefore they
Must leave her now, till some still happier day.
And therewithal more precious gifts she brought
Whereof not e'en in dreams they could have thought,
Things whereof noble stories might be told;
And said: "These matters that you here behold
Shall be the worst of gifts that you shall have;
Farewell, farewell! and may the high gods save
Your lives and fame; and tell our father dear
Of all the honour that I live in here,
And how that greater happiness shall come
When I shall reach a long-enduring home."
Then these, though burning through the night to stay,
Spake loving words, and went upon their way,
When weeping she had kissed them; but they wept
Such tears as traitors do, for as they stepped
Over the threshold, in each other's eyes
They looked, for each was eager to surprise
The envy that their hearts were filled withal,
That to their lips came welling up like gall.

"So," said the first, "this palace without folk,
These wonders done with none to strike a stroke;
This singing in the air, and no one seen,
These gifts too wonderful for any queen;
The trance wherein we both were wrapt away,
And set down by her golden house to-day—
—These are the deeds of gods, and not of men;
And fortunate the day was to her, when
Weeping she left the house where we were born,
And all men deemed her shamed and forlorn."
Then said the other, reddening in her rage,
"She is the luckiest one of all this age;
And yet she might have told us of her case,
What god it is that dwelleth in the place,
Nor sent us forth like beggars from her gate
And beggarly, O sister, is our fate,
Whose husbands wring from miserable hinds
What the first battle scatters to the winds;
While she to us whom from her door she drives
And makes of no account or honour, gives
Such wonderful and priceless gifts as these,
Fit to bedeck the limbs of goddesses!
And yet who knows but she may get a fall?
The strongest tower has not the highest wall.
Think well of this, when you sit safe at home."
By this unto the river were they come,
Where waited Zephyrus unseen, who cast
A languor over them that quickly passed
Into deep sleep, and on the grass they sank;
Then straightway did he lift them from the bank,
And quickly each in her fair house set down,
Then flew aloft above the sleeping town.
Long in their homes they brooded over this,
And how that Psyche nigh a goddess is;
While all folk deemed that she quite lost had been,
For nought they said of all that they had seen.

But now that night when she, with many a kiss,
Had told their coming, and of that and this
That happed, he said, "These things, O Love, are well;
Glad am I that no evil thing befell.

And yet, between my father's house and me
Must thou choose now; then either royally
Shalt thou go home, and wed some king at last,
And have no harm for all that here has passed;
Or else, my love, bear as thy brave heart may,
This loneliness in hope of that fair day,
Which, by my head, shall come to thee; and then
Shalt thou be glorious to the sons of men,
And by my side shalt sit in such estate
That in all time all men shall sing thy fate."
But with that word such love through her he breathed,
That round about him her fair arms she wreathed;
And so with loving passed the night away,
And with fresh hope came on the fresh May day.
And so passed many a day and many a night,
And weariness was balanced with delight,
And into such a mind was Psyche brought,
That little of her father's house she thought,
But ever of the happy day to come
When she should go unto her promised home.

Till she that threw the golden apple down
Upon the board, and lighted up Troy town,
On dusky wings came flying o'er the place,
And seeing Psyche with her happy face
Asleep beneath some fair tree blossoming,
Into her sleep straight cast an evil thing;
Whereby she dreamed she saw her father laid
Panting for breath beneath the golden shade
Of his great bed's embroidered canopy,
And with his last breath moaning heavily
Her name and fancied woes; thereat she woke,
And this ill dream through all her quiet broke,
And when next morn her Love from her would go,
And going, as it was his wont to do,
Would kiss her sleeping, he must find the tears
Filling the hollows of her rosy ears
And wetting half the golden hair that lay
'Twixt him and her: then did he speak and say,
"O Love, why dost thou lie awake and weep,
Who for content shouldst have good heart to sleep
This cold hour ere the dawning?" Nought she said,
But wept aloud. Then cried he, "By my head!
Whate'er thou wishest I will do for thee;
Yea, if it make an end of thee and me."
"O Love," she said, "I scarce dare ask again,
Yet is there in mine heart an aching pain
To know what of my father is become:
So would I send my sisters to my home,
Because I doubt indeed they never told
Of all my honour in this house of gold;
And now of them a great oath would I take."
He said, "Alas! and hast thou been awake
For them indeed? who in my arms asleep
Mightst well have been; for their sakes didst thou weep,
Who mightst have smiled to feel my kiss on thee?
Yet as thou wishest once more shall it be,
Because my oath constrains me, and thy tears.
And yet again beware, and make these fears
Of none avail; nor waver any more,
I pray thee: for already to the shore
Of all delights and joys thou drawest nigh."

He spoke, and from the chamber straight did fly
To highest heaven, and going softly then,
Wearied the father of all gods and men
With prayers for Psyche's immortality.

Meantime went Zephyrus across the sea,
To bring her sisters to her arms again,
Though of that message little was he fain,
Knowing their malice and their cankered hearts.
For now these two had thought upon their parts,
And made up a false tale for Psyche's ear;
For when awaked, to her they drew anear,
Sobbing, their faces in their hands they hid,
Nor when she asked them why this thing they did
Would answer aught, till, trembling, Psyche said,
"Nay, nay, what is it? is our father dead?
Or do ye weep these tears for shame that ye
Have told him not of my felicity,
To make me weep amidst my new-found bliss?
Be comforted, for short the highway is
To my forgiveness: this day shall ye go
And take him gifts, and tell him all ye know
Of this my unexpected happy lot."
Amidst fresh sobs one said, "We told him not
But by good counsel did we hide the thing,
Deeming it well that he should feel the sting
For once, than for awhile be glad again,
And after come to suffer double pain."
"Alas! what mean you, sister?" Psyche said,
For terror waxing pale as are the dead.
"O sister, speak!" "Child, by this loving kiss,"
Spake one of them, "and that remembered bliss
We dwelt in when our mother was alive,
Or ever we began with ills to strive,
By all the hope thou hast to see again
Our aged father and to soothe his pain,
I charge thee tell me,—Hast thou seen the thing
Thou callest Husband?"
Breathless, quivering,
Psyche cried out, "Alas! what sayest thou?
What riddles wilt thou speak unto me now?"
"Alas!" she said; "then is it as I thought.
Sister, in dreadful places have we sought
To learn about thy case, and thus we found
A wise man, dwelling underneath the ground
In a dark awful cave: he told to us
A horrid tale thereof, and piteous,
That thou wert wedded to an evil thing,
A serpent-bodied fiend of poisonous sting,

Bestial of form, yet therewith lacking not
E'en such a soul as wicked men have got;
Thus ages long agone the gods made him,
And set him in a lake hereby to swim;
But every hundred years he hath this grace,
That he may change within this golden place
Into a fair young man by night alone.
Alas, my sister, thou hast cause to groan!
What sayest thou?—*His words are fair and soft;*
He raineth loving kisses on me oft,
Weeping for love; he tells me of a day
When from this place we both shall go away,
And he shall kiss me then no more unseen,
The while I sit by him a glorious queen——
—Alas, poor child! it pleaseth thee, his kiss?
Then must I show thee why he doeth this:
Because he willeth for a time to save
Thy body, wretched one! that he may have
Both child and mother for his watery hell—
Ah, what a tale this is for me to tell!
"Thou prayest us to save thee, and we can;
Since for nought else we sought that wise old man,
Who for great gifts and seeing that of kings
We both were come, has told us all these things,
And given us a fair lamp of hallowed oil
That he has wrought with danger and much toil;
And thereto has he added a sharp knife,
In forging which he well-nigh lost his life,
About him so the devils of the pit
Came swarming—O, my sister, hast thou it?"
Straight from her gown the other one drew out
The lamp and knife, which Psyche, dumb with doubt
And misery at once, took in her hand.
Then said her sister, "From this doubtful land
Thou gav'st us royal gifts a while ago,
But these we give thee, though they lack for show,
Shall be to thee a better gift,—thy life.
Put now in some sure place this lamp and knife,
And when he sleeps rise silently from bed
And hold the hallowed lamp above his head,
And swiftly draw the charméd knife across
His cursed neck, thou well may'st bear the loss;
Nor shall he keep his man's shape more, when he
First feels the iron wrought so mysticly:
But thou, flee unto us, we have a tale,
Of what has been thy lot within this vale,
When we have 'scaped therefrom; which we shall do
By virtue of strange spells the old man knew.
Farewell, sweet sister! here we may not stay,
Lest in returning he should pass this way;
But in the vale we will not fail to wait
Till thou art loosened from thine evil fate."
Thus went they, and for long they said not aught,
Fearful lest any should surprise their thought,
But in such wise had envy conquered fear,
That they were fain that eve to bide anear
Their sister's ruined home; but when they came
Unto the river, on them fell the same
Resistless languor they had felt before,
And from the blossoms of that flowery shore
Their sleeping bodies soon did Zephyr bear,
For other folk to hatch new ills and care.

But on the ground sat Psyche all alone,
The lamp and knife beside her, and no moan
She made, but silent let the long hours go,
Till dark night closed around her and her woe.
Then trembling she arose; for now drew near
The time of utter loneliness and fear,
And she must think of death, who until now
Had thought of ruined life, and love brought low;
And with that thought, tormenting doubt there came,
And images of some unheard-of shame,
Until forlorn, entrapped of gods she felt,
As though in some strange hell her spirit dwelt.
Yet driven by her sisters' words at last,
And by remembrance of the time now past,
When she stood trembling, as the oracle
With all its fearful doom upon her fell,
She to her hapless wedding-chamber turned,
And while the waxen tapers freshly burned
She laid those dread gifts ready to her hand,
Then quenched the lights, and by the bed did stand,
Turning these matters in her troubled mind;
And sometimes hoped some glorious man to find
Beneath the lamp, fit bridegroom for a bride
Like her; ah, then! with what joy to his side
Would she creep back in the dark silent night;
But whiles she quaked at thought of what a sight
The lamp might show her; the hot rush of blood
The knife might shed upon her as she stood,
The dread of some pursuit, the hurrying out,
Through rooms where every sound would seem a shout,
Into the windy night among the trees,
Where many a changing monstrous sight one sees,
When nought at all has happed to chill the blood.

But as among these evil thoughts she stood,
She heard him coming, and straight crept to bed,
And felt him touch her with a new-born dread,
And durst not answer to his words of love.
But when he slept, she rose that tale to prove,
And sliding down as softly as might be,
And moving through the chamber quietly,
She gat the lamp within her trembling hand,
And long, debating of these things, did stand
In that thick darkness, till she seemed to be
A dweller in some black eternity,
And what she once had called the world did seem
A hollow void, a colourless mad dream;

For she felt so alone—three times in vain
She moved her heavy hand, three times again
It fell adown; at last throughout the place
Its flame glared, lighting up her woeful face,
Whose eyes the silken carpet did but meet,
Grown strange and awful, and her own wan feet
As toward the bed she stole; but come thereto
Back with closed eyes and quivering lips, she threw
Her lovely head, and strove to think of it,
While images of fearful things did flit
Before her eyes; thus, raising up the hand
That bore the lamp, one moment did she stand
As man's time tells it, and then suddenly
Opened her eyes, but scarce kept back a cry
At what she saw; for there before her lay
The very Love brighter than dawn of day;
And as he lay there smiling, her own name
His gentle lips in sleep began to frame,
And as to touch her face his hand did move;
O then, indeed, her faint heart swelled for love,
And she began to sob, and tears fell fast
Upon the bed.—But as she turned at last
To quench the lamp, there happed a little thing
That quenched her new delight, for flickering
The treacherous flame cast on his shoulder fair
A burning drop; he woke, and seeing her there
The meaning of that sad sight knew full well,
Nor was there need the piteous tale to tell.

Then on her knees she fell with a great cry,
For in his face she saw the thunder nigh,
And she began to know what she had done,
And saw herself henceforth, unloved, alone,
Pass onward to the grave; and once again
She heard the voice she now must love in vain.
"Ah, has it come to pass? and hast thou lost
A life of love, and must thou still be tossed
One moment in the sun 'twixt night and night?
And must I lose what would have been delight,
Untasted yet amidst immortal bliss,
To wed a soul made worthy of my kiss,
Set in a frame so wonderfully made?
"O wavering heart, farewell! be not afraid
That I with fire will burn thy body fair,
Or cast thy sweet limbs piecemeal through the air;
The fates shall work thy punishment alone,
And thine own memory of our kindness done.
"Alas! what wilt thou do? how shalt thou bear
The cruel world, the sickening still despair,
The mocking, curious faces bent on thee,
When thou hast known what love there is in me?
O happy only, if thou couldst forget,
And live unholpen, lonely, loveless yet,
But untormented through the little span
That on the earth ye call the life of man.
Alas! that thou, too fair a thing to die,
Shouldst so be born to double misery!

"Farewell! though I, a god, can never know
How thou canst lose thy pain, yet time will go
Over thine head, and thou mayst mingle yet
The bitter and the sweet, nor quite forget,
Nor quite remember, till these things shall seem
The wavering memory of a lovely dream."

Therewith he caught his shafts up and his bow,
And striding through the chambers did he go,
Light all around him; and she, wailing sore,
Still followed after; but he turned no more,
And when into the moonlit night he came
From out her sight he vanished like a flame,
And on the threshold till the dawn of day
Through all the changes of the night she lay.

At daybreak when she lifted up her eyes,
She looked around with heavy dull surprise,
And rose to enter the fair golden place;
But then remembering all her piteous case
She turned away, lamenting very sore,
And wandered down unto the river shore;
There, at the head of a green pool and deep,
She stood so long that she forgot to weep,
And the wild things about the water-side
From such a silent thing cared not to hide;
The dace pushed 'gainst the stream, the dragon-fly,
With its green-painted wing, went flickering by;
The water-hen, the lustred kingfisher,
Went on their ways and took no heed of her;
The little reed birds never ceased to sing,
And still the eddy, like a living thing,
Broke into sudden gurgles at her feet.
But 'midst these fair things, on that morning sweet,
How could she, weary creature, find a place?
She moved at last, and lifting up her face,
Gathered her raiment up and cried, "Farewell,
O fairest lord! and since I cannot dwell
With thee in heaven, let me now hide my head
In whatsoever dark place dwell the dead!"
And with that word she leapt into the stream,
But the kind river even yet did deem
That she should live, and, with all gentle care,
Cast her ashore within a meadow fair.
Upon the other side, where Shepherd Pan
Sat looking down upon the water wan,
Goat-legged and merry, who called out, "Fair
maid,
Why goest thou hurrying to the feeble shade
Whence none return? Well do I know thy pain,
For I am old, and have not lived in vain;
Thou wilt forget all that within a while,
And on some other happy youth wilt smile;
And sure he must be dull indeed if he
Forget not all things in his ecstasy

At sight of such a wonder made for him,
That in that clinging gown makes mine eyes swim,
Old as I am: but to the god of Love
Pray now, sweet child, for all things can he move."
Weeping she passed him, but full reverently,
And well she saw that she was not to die
Till she had filled the measure of her woe.

So through the meads she passed, half blind and slow,
And on her sisters somewhat now she thought;
And, pondering on the evil they had wrought,
The veil fell from her, and she saw their guile.
"Alas!" she said, "can death make folk so vile?
What wonder that the gods are glorious then,
Who cannot feel the hates and fears of men?
Sisters, alas, for what ye used to be!
Once did I think, whatso might hap to me,
Still at the worst, within your arms to find
A haven of pure love; then were ye kind,
Then was your joy e'en as my very own—
And now, and now, if I can be alone
That is my best: but that can never be,
For your unkindness still shall stay with me
When ye are dead—But thou, my love! my dear!
Wert thou not kind?—I should have lost my fear
Within a little—Yea, and e'en just now
With angry godhead on thy lovely brow,
Still thou wert kind—And art thou gone away
For ever? I know not, but day by day
Still will I seek thee till I come to die,
And nurse remembrance of felicity
Within my heart, although it wound me sore;
For what am I but thine for evermore!"

Thenceforth her back upon the world she turned
As she had known it; in her heart there burned
Such deathless love, that still untired she went:
The huntsman dropping down the woody bent,
In the still evening, saw her passing by,
And for her beauty fain would draw anigh,
But yet durst not; the shepherd on the down
Wondering, would shade his eyes with fingers brown,
As on the hill's brow, looking o'er the lands,
She stood with straining eyes and clinging hands,
While the wind blew the raiment from her feet;
The wandering soldier her grey eyes would meet,
That took no heed of him, and drop his own;
Like a thin dream she passed the clattering town;
On the thronged quays she watched the ships come in
Patient, amid the strange outlandish din;
Unscared she saw the sacked towns' miseries,
And marching armies passed before her eyes.
And still of her the god had such a care
That none might wrong her, though alone and fair.
Through rough and smooth she wandered many a day,
Till all her hope had well-nigh passed away.

Meanwhile the sisters, each in her own home,
Waited the day when outcast she should come
And ask their pity; when perchance, indeed,
They looked to give her shelter in her need,
And with soft words such faint reproaches take
As she durst make them for her ruin's sake;
But day passed day, and still no Psyche came,
And while they wondered whether, to their shame
Their plot had failed, or gained its end too well,
And Psyche slain, no tale thereof could tell.—
Amidst these things, the eldest sister lay
Asleep one evening of a summer day,
Dreaming she saw the god of Love anigh,
Who seemed to say unto her lovingly,
"Hail unto thee, fair sister of my love;
Nor fear me for that thou her faith didst prove,
And found it wanting, for thou too art fair,
Nor is her place filled; rise, and have no care
For father or for friends, but go straightway
Unto the rock where she was borne that day;
There, if thou hast a will to be my bride,
Put thou all fear of horrid death aside,
And leap from off the cliff, and there will come
My slaves, to bear thee up and take thee home.
Haste then, before the summer night grows late,
For in my house thy beauty I await!"

So spake the dream; and through the night did sail,
And to the other sister bore the tale,
While this one rose, nor doubted of the thing,
Such deadly pride unto her heart did cling;
But by the tapers' light triumphantly,
Smiling, her mirrored body did she eye,
Then hastily rich raiment on her cast
And through the sleeping serving-people passed,
And looked with changed eyes on the moonlit street,
Nor scarce could feel the ground beneath her feet.
But long the time seemed to her, till she came
There where her sister once was borne to shame;
And when she reached the bare cliff's rugged brow
She cried aloud, "O Love, receive me now,
Who am not all unworthy to be thine!"
And with that word, her jewelled arms did shine
Outstretched beneath the moon, and with one breath
She sprung to meet the outstretched arms of Death,
The only god that waited for her there;
And in a gathered moment of despair
A hideous thing her traitrous life did seem.

But with the passing of that hollow dream
The other sister rose, and as she might,
Arrayed herself alone in that still night,
And so stole forth, and making no delay
Came to the rock anigh the dawn of day;
No warning there her sister's spirit gave,
No doubt came nigh the fore-doomed soul to save,
But with a fever burning in her blood,
With glittering eyes and crimson cheeks she stood
One moment on the brow, the while she cried,
"Receive me, Love, chosen to be thy bride
From all the million women of the world!"
Then o'er the cliff her wicked limbs were hurled,
Nor has the language of the earth a name
For that surprise of terror and of shame.

Now, midst her wanderings, on a hot noontide,
Psyche passed down a road, where, on each side,
The yellow cornfields lay, although as yet
Unto the stalks no sickle had been set;
The lark sung over them, the butterfly
Flickered from ear to ear distractedly,
The kestrel hung above, the weasel peered
From out the wheat-stalks on her unafeard,
Along the road the trembling poppies shed
On the burnt grass their crumpled leaves and red;
Most lonely was it, nothing Psyche knew
Unto what land of all the world she drew;
Aweary was she, faint and sick at heart,
Bowed to the earth by thoughts of that sad part
She needs must play: some blue flower from the corn
That in her fingers erewhile she had borne,
Now dropped from them, still clung unto her gown;
Over the hard way hung her head adown
Despairingly, but still her weary feet
Moved on half conscious, her lost love to meet.
So going, at the last she raised her eyes,
And saw a grassy mound before her rise
Over the yellow plain, and thereon was
A marble fane with doors of burnished brass,
That 'twixt the pillars set about it burned;
So thitherward from off the road she turned,
And soon she heard a rippling water sound,
And reached a stream that girt the hill around,
Whose green waves wooed her body lovingly;
So looking round, and seeing no soul anigh,
Unclad, she crossed the shallows, and there laid
Her dusty raiment in the alder-shade,
And slipped adown into the shaded pool,
And with the pleasure of the water cool
Soothed her tired limbs awhile, then with a sigh
Came forth, and clad her body hastily,
And up the hill made for the little fane.
But when its threshold now her feet did gain,
She, looking through the pillars of the shrine,
Beheld therein a golden image shine
Of golden Ceres; then she passed the door,
And with bowed head she stood awhile before
The smiling image, striving for some word
That did not name her lover and her lord,
Until midst rising tears at last she prayed:
"O kind one, if while yet I was a maid
I ever did thee pleasure, on this day
Be kind to me, poor wanderer on the way,
Who strive my love upon the earth to meet!
Then let me rest my weary, doubtful feet
Within thy quiet house a little while,
And on my rest if thou wouldst please to smile,
And send me news of my own love and lord,
It would not cost thee, lady, many a word."
But straight from out the shrine a sweet voice came,
"O Psyche, though of me thou hast no blame,
And though indeed thou sparedst not to give
What my soul loved, while happy thou didst live,
Yet little can I give now unto thee,
Since thou art rebel, slave, and enemy
Unto the love-inspiring Queen; this grace
Thou hast alone of me, to leave this place
Free as thou camest, though the lovely one
Seeks for the sorceress who entrapped her son
In every land, and has small joy in aught,
Until before her presence thou art brought."
Then Psyche, trembling at the words she spake,
Durst answer nought, nor for that counsel's sake
Could other offerings leave except her tears;
As now, tormented by the new-born fears
The words divine had raised in her, she passed
The brazen threshold once again, and cast
A dreary hopeless look across the plain,
Whose golden beauty now seemed nought and vain
Unto her aching heart; then down the hill
She went, and crossed the shallows of the rill,
And wearily she went upon her way,
Nor any homestead passed upon that day,
Nor any hamlet, and at night lay down
Within a wood, far off from any town.

There, waking at the dawn, did she behold,
Through the green leaves, a glimmer as of gold,
And, passing on, amidst an oak-grove found
A pillared temple gold-adorned and round,
Whose walls were hung with rich and precious things,
Worthy to be the ransom of great kings;
And in the midst of gold and ivory
An image of Queen Juno did she see;

Then her heart swelled within her, and she thought,
"Surely the gods hereto my steps have brought,
And they will yet be merciful and give
Some little joy to me, that I may live
Till my Love finds me." Then upon her knees
She fell, and prayed, "O Crown of goddesses,
I pray thee, give me shelter in this place,
Nor turn away from me thy much-loved face,
If ever I gave golden gifts to thee
In happier times when my right hand was free."
Then from the inmost shrine there came a voice
That said, "It is so, well mayst thou rejoice
That of thy gifts I yet have memory,
Wherefore mayst thou depart forewarned and free;
Since she that won the golden apple lives,
And to her servants mighty gifts now gives
To find thee out, in whatso land thou art,
For thine undoing: loiter not, depart!
For what immortal yet shall shelter thee
From her that rose from out the unquiet sea?"
Then Psyche moaned out in her grief and fear,
"Alas! and is there shelter anywhere
Upon the green flame-hiding earth?" said she,
"Or yet beneath it is there peace for me?
O Love, since in thine arms I cannot rest,
Or lay my weary head upon thy breast,
Have pity yet upon thy love forlorn,
Make me as though I never had been born!"

Then wearily she went upon her way,
And so, about the middle of the day,
She came before a green and flowery place,
Walled round about in manner of a chase,
Whereof the gates as now were open wide;
Fair grassy glades and long she saw inside
Betwixt great trees, down which the unscared deer
Were playing; yet a pang of deadly fear,
She knew not why, shot coldly through her heart,
And thrice she turned as though she would depart,
And thrice returned, and in the gateway stood
With wavering feet: small flowers as red as blood
Were growing up amid the soft green grass,
And here and there a fallen rose there was,
And on the trodden grass a silken lace,
As though crowned revellers had passed by the place.
The restless sparrows chirped upon the wall
And faint far music on her ears did fall,
And from the trees within, the pink-foot doves
Still told their weary tale unto their loves,
And all seemed peaceful more than words could say.
Then she, whose heart still whispered, "Keep away,"
Was drawn by strong desire unto the place,
So toward the greenest glade she set her face,
Murmuring, "Alas! and what a wretch am I,
That I should fear the summer's greenery!
Yea, and is death now any more an ill,
When lonely through the world I wander still."
But when she was amidst those ancient groves,
Whose close green leaves and choirs of moaning doves
Shut out the world, then so alone she seemed,
So strange, her former life was but as dreamed;
Beside the hopes and fears that drew her on,
Till so far through that green place she had won,
That she a rose-hedged garden could behold
Before a house made beautiful with gold;
Which, to her mind beset with that past dream,
And dim foreshadowings of ill fate, did seem
That very house, her joy and misery,
Where that fair sight her longing eyes did see
They should not see again; but now the sound
Of pensive music echoing all around,
Made all things like a picture, and from thence
Bewildering odours floating, dulled her sense,
And killed her fear, and, urged by strong desire
To see how all should end, she drew yet nigher,
And o'er the hedge beheld the heads of girls
Embraced by garlands fresh, and orient pearls,
And heard sweet voices murmuring; then a thrill
Of utmost joy all memory seemed to kill
Of good or evil, and her eager hand
Was on the wicket, then her feet did stand
Upon new flowers, the while her dizzied eyes
Gazed wildly round on half-seen mysteries,
And wandered from unnoting face to face.
For round a fountain midst the flowery place
Did she behold full many a minstrel girl;
While nigh them, on the grass in giddy whirl,
Bright raiment and white limbs and sandalled feet
Flew round in time unto the music sweet,
Whose strains no more were pensive now nor sad,
But rather a fresh sound of triumph had;
And round the dance were gathered damsels fair,
Clad in rich robes adorned with jewels rare;
Or little hidden by some woven mist,
That, hanging round them, here a bosom kissed
And there a knee, or driven by the wind
About some lily's bowing stem was twined.

But when a little Psyche's eyes grew clear,
A sight they saw that brought back all her fear
A hundred-fold, though neither heaven nor earth
To such a fair sight elsewhere could give birth;
Because apart, upon a golden throne
Of marvellous work, a woman sat alone,
Watching the dancers with a smiling face,
Whose beauty sole had lighted up the place.
A crown there was upon her glorious head,
A garland round about her girdlestead,
Where matchless wonders of the hidden sea
Were brought together and set wonderfully;

Naked she was of all else, but her hair
About her body rippled here and there,
And lay in heaps upon the golden seat,
And even touched the gold cloth where her feet
Lay amid roses—ah, how kind she seemed!
What depths of love from out her grey eyes beamed!

Well might the birds leave singing on the trees
To watch in peace that crown of goddesses,
Yet well might Psyche sicken at the sight,
And feel her feet wax heavy, her head light;
For now at last her evil day was come,
Since she had wandered to the very home
Of her most bitter cruel enemy.
Half-dead, yet must she turn about to flee,
But as her eyes back o'er her shoulder gazed,
And with weak hands her clinging gown she raised,
And from her lips unwitting came a moan,
She felt strong arms about her body thrown,
And, blind with fear, was haled along till she
Saw floating by her faint eyes dizzily
That vision of the pearls and roses fresh,
The golden carpet and the rosy flesh.
Then, as in vain she strove to make some sound,
A sweet voice seemed to pierce the air around
With bitter words; her doom rang in her ears,
She felt the misery that lacketh tears.
"Come hither, damsels, and the pearl behold
That hath no price? See now the thrice-tried gold,
That all men worshipped, that a god would have
To be his bride! how like a wretched slave
She cowers down, and lacketh even voice
To plead her cause! Come, damsels, and rejoice,
That now once more the waiting world will move,
Since she is found, the well-loved soul of love!
"And thou, poor wretch, what god hath led thee here?
Art thou so lost in this abyss of fear,
Thou canst not weep thy misery and shame?
Canst thou not even speak thy shameful name?"

But even then the flame of fervent love
In Psyche's tortured heart began to move,
And gave her utterance, and she said, "Alas!
Surely the end of life has come to pass
For me, who have been bride of very Love,
Yet love still bides in me, O Seed of Jove,
For such I know thee; slay me, nought is lost!
For had I had the will to count the cost
And buy my love with all this misery,
Thus and no otherwise the thing should be.
Would I were dead, my wretched beauty gone,
No trouble now to thee or any one!"
And with that last word did she hang her head,
As one who hears not, whatsoe'er is said;
But Venus rising with a dreadful cry
Said, "O thou fool, I will not let thee die!
But thou shalt reap the harvest thou hast sown
And many a day thy wretched lot bemoan.
Thou art my slave, and not a day shall be
But I will find some fitting task for thee,
Nor will I slay thee till thou hop'st again.
What, thinkest thou that utterly in vain
Jove is my sire, and in despite my will
That thou canst mock me with thy beauty still?
Come forth, O strong-armed, punish this new slave,
That she henceforth a humble heart may have."
All round about the damsels in a ring
Were drawn to see the ending of the thing,
And now as Psyche's eyes stared wildly round
No help in any face of them she found
As from the fair and dreadful face she turned
In whose grey eyes such steadfast anger burned;
Yet midst her agony she scarcely knew
What thing it was the goddess bade them do,
And all the pageant, like a dreadful dream
Hopeless and long-enduring grew to seem;
Yea, when the strong-armed through the crowd did break,
Girls like to those, whose close-locked squadron shake
The echoing surface of the Asian plain,
And when she saw their threatening hands, in vain
She strove to speak, so like a dream it was;
So like a dream that this should come to pass,
And 'neath her feet the green earth opened not.
But when her breaking heart again waxed hot
With dreadful thoughts and prayers unspeakable
As all their bitter torment on her fell,
When she her own voice heard, nor knew its sound,
And like red flame she saw the trees and ground,
Then first she seemed to know what misery
To helpless folk upon the earth can be.

But while beneath the many moving feet
The small crushed flowers sent up their odour sweet,
Above sat Venus, calm, and very fair,
Her white limbs bared of all her golden hair,
Into her heart all wrath cast back again,
As on the terror and the helpless pain
She gazed with gentle eyes, and unmoved smile;
Such as in Cyprus, the fair blossomed isle,
When on the altar in the summer night
They pile the roses up for her delight,
Men see within their hearts, and long that they
Unto her very body there might pray.
At last to them some dainty sign she made
To hold their cruel hands, and therewith bade
To bear her slave new gained from out her sight
And keep her safely till the morrow's light:

So her across the sunny sward they led
With fainting limbs, and heavy downcast head,
And into some nigh lightless prison cast
To brood alone o'er happy days long past
And all the dreadful times that yet should be.
But she being gone, one moment pensively
The goddess did the distant hills behold,
Then bade her girls bind up her hair of gold,
And veil her breast, the very forge of love,
With raiment that no earthly shuttle wove,
And 'gainst the hard earth arm her lovely feet:
Then she went forth, some shepherd king to meet
Deep in the hollow of a shaded vale,
To make his woes a long-enduring tale.

But over Psyche, hapless and forlorn,
Unseen the sun rose on the morrow morn,
Nor knew she aught about the death of night
Until her gaoler's torches filled with light
The dreary place, blinding her unused eyes,
And she their voices heard that bade her rise;
She did their bidding, yet grown faint and pale
She shrank away and strove her arms to veil
In her gown's bosom, and to hide from them
Her little feet within her garment's hem;
But mocking her, they brought her thence away,
And led her forth into the light of day,
And brought her to a marble cloister fair
Where sat the queen on her adorned chair,
But she, as down the sun-streaked place they came,
Cried out, "Haste! ye, who lead my grief and shame."
And when she stood before her trembling, said,
"Although within a palace thou wast bred
Yet dost thou carry but a slavish heart,
And fitting is it thou shouldst learn thy part,
And know the state whereunto thou art brought;
Now, heed what yesterday thy folly taught,
And set thyself to-day my will to do;
Ho ye, bring that which I commanded you."

Then forth came two, and each upon her back
Bore up with pain a huge half-bursten sack,
Which, setting down, they opened on the floor,
And from their hempen mouths a stream did pour
Of mingled seeds, and grain, peas, pulse, and wheat,
Poppies and millet, and coriander sweet,
And many another brought from far-off lands,
Which mingling more with swift and ready hands
They piled into a heap confused and great.
And then said Venus, rising from her seat,
"Slave, here I leave thee, but before the night
These mingled seeds thy hands shall set aright,
All laid in heaps, each after its own kind,
And if in any heap I chance to find
An alien seed; thou knowest since yesterday
How disobedient slaves the forfeit pay."
Therewith she turned and left the palace fair
And from its outskirts rose into the air,
And flew until beneath her lay the sea,
Then, looking on its green waves lovingly,
Somewhat she dropped, and low adown she flew
Until she reached the temple that she knew
Within a sunny bay of her fair isle.

But Psyche sadly labouring all the while
With hopeless heart felt the swift hours go by,
And knowing well what bitter mockery
Lay in that task, yet did she what she might
That something should be finished ere the night,
And she a little mercy yet might ask;
But the first hours of that long feverish task
Passed amid mocks; for oft the damsels came
About her, and made merry with her shame,
And laughed to see her trembling eagerness,
And how, with some small lappet of her dress,
She winnowed out the wheat, and how she bent
Over the millet, hopelessly intent;
And how she guarded well some tiny heap
But just begun, from their long raiments' sweep;
And how herself, with girt gown, carefully
She went betwixt the heaps that 'gan to lie
Along the floor; though they were small enow,
When shadows lengthened and the sun was low;
But at the last these left her labouring,
Not daring now to weep, lest some small thing
Should 'scape her blinded eyes, and soon far off
She heard the echoes of their careless scoff.
Longer the shades grew, quicker sank the sun,
Until at last the day was well-nigh done,
And every minute did she think to hear
The fair Queen's dreaded footsteps drawing near;
But Love, that moves the earth, and skies, and sea,
Beheld his old love in her misery,
And wrapped her heart in sudden gentle sleep;
And meanwhile caused unnumbered ants to creep
About her, and they wrought so busily
That all, ere sundown, was as it should be,
And homeward went again the kingless folk.
Bewildered with her joy again she woke,
But scarce had time the unseen hands to bless,
That thus had helped her utter feebleness,
Ere Venus came, fresh from the watery way,
Panting with all the pleasure of the day;
But when she saw the ordered heaps, her smile
Faded away, she cried out, "Base and vile
Thou art indeed; this labour fitteth thee;
But now I know thy feigned simplicity,
Thine inward cunning, therefore hope no more,
Since thou art furnished well with hidden lore;

To 'scape thy due reward, if any day
Without some task accomplished, pass away!"
So with a frown she passed on, muttering,
"Nought have I done, to-morrow a new thing."

So the next morning Psyche did they lead
Unto a terrace o'er a flowery mead,
Where Venus sat, hid from the young sun's rays,
Upon the fairest of all summer days;
She pointed o'er the meads as they drew nigh,
And said, "See how that stream goes glittering by,
And on its banks my golden sheep now pass,
Cropping sweet mouthfuls of the flowery grass;
If thou, O cunning slave, to-day art fain
To save thyself from well-remembered pain,
Put forth a little of thy hidden skill,
And with their golden fleece thy bosom fill;
Yet make no haste, but ere the sun is down
Cast it before my feet from out thy gown;
Surely thy labour is but light to-day."
Then sadly went poor Psyche on her way,
Wondering wherein the snare lay, for she knew
No easy thing it was she had to do;
Nor had she failed indeed to note the smile
Wherewith the goddess praised her for the guile
That she, unhappy, lacked so utterly.
Amidst these thoughts she crossed the flowery lea,
And came unto the glittering river's side;
And, seeing it was neither deep nor wide,
She drew her sandals off, and to the knee
Girt up her gown, and by a willow-tree
Went down into the water, and but sank
Up to mid-leg therein; but from the bank
She scarce had gone three steps, before a voice
Called out to her, "Stay, Psyche, and rejoice
That I am here to help thee, a poor reed,
The soother of the loving hearts that bleed,
The pourer forth of notes, that oft have made
The weak man strong, and the rash man afraid.
"Sweet child, when by me now thy dear foot trod,
I knew thee for the loved one of our god;
Then prithee take my counsel in good part;
Go to the shore again, and rest thine heart
In sleep awhile, until the sun get low,
And then across the river shalt thou go
And find these evil creatures sleeping fast,
And on the bushes whereby they have passed
Much golden wool; take what seems good to thee,
And ere the sun sets, go back easily.
But if within that mead thou sett'st thy feet
While yet they wake, an ill death shalt thou meet,
For they are of a cursed man-hating race,
Bred by a giant in a lightless place."
But at these words soft tears filled Psyche's eyes
As hope of love within her heart did rise;
And when she saw she was not helpless yet
Her old desire she would not quite forget;
But turning back, upon the bank she lay
In happy dreams till nigh the end of day;
Then did she cross and gather of the wool,
And with her bosom and her gown-skirt full
Came back to Venus at the sun-setting;
But she afar off saw it glistering
And cried aloud, "Go, take the slave away,
And keep her safe for yet another day,
And on the morning will I think again
Of some fresh task, since with so little pain
She doeth what the gods find hard enow;
For since the winds were pleased this waif to blow
Unto my door, a fool I were indeed,
If I should fail to use her for my need."
So her they led away from that bright sun,
Now scarce more hopeful that the task was done,
Since by those bitter words she knew full well
Another tale the coming day would tell.

But the next morn upon a turret high,
Where the wind kissed her raiment lovingly,
Stood Venus waiting her; and when she came
She said, "O slave, thy city's very shame,
Lift up thy cunning eyes, and looking hence
Shalt thou behold betwixt these battlements,
A black and barren mountain set aloof
From the green hills, shaped like a palace roof.
Ten leagues from hence it lieth, toward the north,
And from its rocks a fountain welleth forth,
Black like itself, and floweth down its side,
And in a while part into Styx doth glide,
And part into Cocytus runs away;
Now coming thither by the end of day,
Fill me this ewer from out the awful stream.
Such task a sorceress like thee will deem
A little matter; bring it not to pass,
And if thou be not made of steel or brass,
To-morrow shalt thou find the bitterest day
Thou yet hast known, and all be sport and play
To what thy heart in that hour shall endure—
Behold, I swear it, and my word is sure!"
She turned therewith to go down toward the sea,
To meet her lover, who from Thessaly
Was come from some well-foughten field of war.

But Psyche, wandering wearily afar,
Reached the bare foot of that black rock at last,
And sat there grieving for the happy past,
For surely now, she thought, no help could be:
She had but reached the final misery,
Nor had she any counsel but to weep.
For not alone the place was very steep,
And craggy beyond measure, but she knew
What well it was that she was driven to,
The dreadful water that the gods swear by,
For there on either hand, as one draws nigh,
Are long-necked dragons ready for the spring,

And many another monstrous nameless thing,
The very sight of which is well-nigh death;
Then the black water as it goes crieth,
"Fly, wretched one, before you come to die!
Die, wretched man! I will not let you fly!
How have you heart to come before me here?
You have no heart, your life is turned to fear!"
Till the wretch falls adown with whirling brain,
And far below the sharp rocks end his pain.
Well then might Psyche wail her wretched fate,
And strive no more, but sitting weep and wait
Alone in that black land for kindly death,
With weary sobbing, wasting life and breath;
But o'er her head there flew the bird of Jove,
The bearer of his servant, friend of Love,
Who, when he saw her, straightway towards her flew,
And asked her why she wept, and when he knew,
And who she was, he said, "Cease all thy fear,
For to the black waves I thy ewer will bear,
And fill it for thee; but, remember me,
When thou art come unto thy majesty."
Then straight he flew, and through the dragon's wings
Went carelessly, nor feared their clatterings,
But set the ewer, filled, in her right hand,
And on that day saw many another land.

Then Psyche through the night toiled back again,
And as she went, she thought, "Ah! all is vain,
For though once more I just escape indeed,
Yet hath she many another wile at need;
And to these days when I my life first learn,
With unavailing longing shall I turn,
When this that seemeth now so horrible
Shall then seem but the threshold of her hell.
Alas! what shall I do? for even now
In sleep I see her pitiless white brow,
And hear the dreadful sound of her commands,
While with my helpless body and bound hands
I tremble underneath the cruel whips;
And oft for dread of her, with quivering lips
I wake, and waking know the time draws nigh
When nought shall wake me from that misery—
Behold, O Love, because of thee I live,
Because of thee, with these things still I strive."

Now with the risen sun her weary feet
The late-strewn roses of the floor did meet
Upon the marble threshold of the place;
But she being brought before the matchless face,
Fresh with the new life of another day,
Beheld her wondering, for the goddess lay
With half-shut eyes upon her golden bed,
And when she entered scarcely turned her head,
But smiling spake, "The gods are good to thee,
Nor shalt thou always be mine enemy;
But one more task I charge thee with to-day.
Now unto Proserpine take thou thy way,
And give this golden casket to her hands,
And pray the fair Queen of the gloomy lands
To fill the void shell with that beauty rare
That long ago as queen did set her there;
Nor needest thou to fail in this new thing,
Who hast to-day the heart and wit to bring
This dreadful water, and return alive;
And, that thou may'st the more in this thing strive,
If thou returnest I will show at last
My kindness unto thee, and all the past
Shalt thou remember as an ugly dream."
And now at first to Psyche did it seem
Her heart was softening to her, and the thought
Swelled her full heart to sobbing, and it brought
Into her yearning eyes half-happy tears:
But on her way cold thoughts and dreadful fears
Rose in her heart, for who indeed could teach
A living soul that dread abode to reach
And yet return? and then once more it seemed
The hope of mercy was but lightly dreamed,
And she remembered that triumphant smile,
And needs must think, "This is the final wile,
Alas! what trouble must a goddess take
So weak a thing as this poor heart to break.
"See now this tower! from off its top will I
Go quick to Proserpine—ah, good to die!
Rather than hear those shameful words again,
And bear that unimaginable pain
Which she has hoarded for to-morrow morn;
Now is the ending of my life forlorn!
O Love, farewell, thou seest all hope is dead,
Thou seest what torments on my wretched head
Thy bitter mother doth not cease to heap;
Farewell, O Love, for thee and life I weep.
Alas, my foolish heart! alas, my sin!
Alas, for all the love I could not win!"

Now was this tower both old enough and grey,
Built by some king forgotten many a day,
And no man dwelt there, now that bitter war
From that bright land had long been driven afar;
There now she entered, trembling and afraid;
But 'neath her doubtful steps the dust long laid
In utter rest, rose up into the air,
And wavered in the wind that down the stair
Rushed to the door; then she drew back a pace,
Moved by the coolness of the lonely place
That for so long had seen no ray of sun.
Then shuddering did she hear these words begun,
Like a wind's moaning voice, "Have thou no fear
The hollow words of one long slain to hear!
Thou livest, and thy hope is not yet dead,

And if thou heedest me, thou well may'st tread
The road to hell, and yet return again.
"For thou must go o'er many a hill and plain
Until to Sparta thou art come at last,
And when the ancient city thou hast passed
A mountain shalt thou reach, that men now call
Mount Tænarus, that riseth like a wall
'Twixt plain and upland, therein shalt thou find
The wide mouth of a cavern huge and blind,
Wherein there cometh never any sun,
Whose dreadful darkness all things living shun;
This shun thou not, but yet take care to have
Three honey-cakes thy soul alive to save,
And in thy mouth a piece of money set,
Then through the dark go boldly, and forget
The stories thou hast heard of death and hell,
And heed my words, and then shall all be well.
"For when thou hast passed through that cavern blind,
A place of dim grey meadows shalt thou find,
Wherethrough to inmost hell a path doth lead,
Which follow thou, with diligence and heed;
For as thou goest there, thou soon shalt see
Two men like peasants loading painfully
A fallen ass; these unto thee will call
To help them, but give thou no heed at all,
But pass them swiftly; and then soon again
Within a shed three crones shalt thou see plain
Busily weaving, who shall bid thee leave
The road and fill their shuttles while they weave,
But slacken not thy steps for all their prayers,
For these are shadows only, and set snares.
"At last thou comest to a water wan,
And at the bank shall be the ferryman
Surly and grey; and when he asketh thee
Of money for thy passage, hastily
Show him thy mouth, and straight from off thy lip
The money he will take, and in his ship
Embark thee and set forward; but beware,
For on thy passage is another snare;
From out the waves a grisly head shall come,
Most like thy father thou hast left at home;
And pray for passage long and piteously,
But on thy life of him have no pity,
Else art thou lost; also thy father lives,
And in the temples of the high gods gives
Great daily gifts for thy returning home.
"When thou unto the other side art come,
A palace shalt thou see of fiery gold,
And by the door thereof shalt thou behold
An ugly triple monster, that shall yell
For thine undoing; now behold him well,
And into each mouth of him cast a cake,
And no more heed of thee then shall he take,
And thou may'st pass into a glorious hall
Where many a wonder hangs upon the wall;
But far more wonderful than anything
The fair slim consort of the gloomy King,
Arrayed all royally shalt thou behold,
Who sitting on a carven throne of gold,
Whene'er thou enterest shall rise up to thee,
And bid thee welcome there most lovingly,
And pray thee on a royal bed to sit,
And share her feast; yet eat thou not of it,
But sitting on the ground eat bread alone,
Then do thy message kneeling by her throne;
And when thou hast the gift, return with speed;
The sleepy dog of thee shall take no heed,
The ferryman shall bear thee on thy way
Without more words, and thou shalt see the day
Unharmed if that dread box thou openest not;
But if thou dost, then death shall be thy lot.

"O beautiful, when safe thou com'st again,
Remember me, who lie here in such pain
Unburied; set me in some tomb of stone,
When thou hast gathered every little bone;
But never shalt thou set thereon a name,
Because my ending was with grief and shame,
Who was a Queen like thee long years agone,
And in this tower so long have lain alone."

Then, pale and full of trouble, Psyche went
Bearing the casket, and her footsteps bent
To Lacedæmon, and thence found her way
To Tænarus, and there the golden day
For that dark cavern did she leave behind;
Then, going boldly through it, did she find
The shadowy meads which that wide way ran through,
Under a seeming sky 'twixt grey and blue;
No wind blew there, there was no bird or tree,
Or beast, and dim grey flowers she did but see
That never faded in that changeless place,
And if she had but seen a living face
Most strange and bright she would have thought it there,
Or if her own face, troubled, yet so fair,
The still pools by the road-side could have shown
The dimness of that place she might have known;
But their dull surface cast no image back,
For all but dreams of light that land did lack.
So on she passed, still noting every thing,
Nor yet had she forgotten there to bring
The honey-cakes and money: in a while
She saw those shadows striving hard to pile
The bales upon the ass, and heard them call,
"O woman, help us! for our skill is small
And we are feeble in this place indeed;"
But swiftly did she pass, nor gave them heed,
Though after her from far their cries they sent.
Then a long way adown that road she went,
Not seeing aught, till, as the Shade had said,

She came upon three women in a shed
Busily weaving, who cried, "Daughter, leave
The beaten road a while, and as we weave
Fill thou our shuttles with these endless threads,
For here our eyes are sleepy, and our heads
Are feeble in this miserable place."
But for their words she did but mend her pace,
Although her heart beat quick as she passed by.

Then on she went, until she could espy
The wan, grey river lap the leaden bank
Wherefrom there sprouted sparsely sedges rank,
And there the road had end in that sad boat
Wherein the dead men unto Minos float;
There stood the ferryman, who now, seeing her, said,
"O living soul, that thus among the dead
Hast come, on whatso errand, without fear,
Know thou that penniless none passes here;
Of all the coins that rich men have on earth
To buy the dreadful folly they call mirth,
But one they keep when they have passed the grave,
That o'er this stream a passage they may have;
And thou, though living, art but dead to me,
Who here, immortal, see mortality
Pass, stripped of this last thing that men desire
Unto the changeless meads or changeless fire."
Speechless she showed the money on her lip
Which straight he took, and set her in the ship,
And then the wretched, heavy oars he threw
Into the rowlocks and the flood they drew;
Silent, with eyes that looked beyond her face,
He laboured, and they left the dreary place.
But midmost of that water did arise
A dead man, pale, with ghastly staring eyes
That somewhat like her father still did seem,
But in such wise as figures in a dream;
Then with a lamentable voice it cried,
"O daughter, I am dead, and in this tide
For ever shall I drift, an unnamed thing,
Who was thy father once, a mighty king,
Unless thou take some pity on me now,
And bid the ferryman turn here his prow,
That I with thee to some abode may cross.
And little unto thee will be the loss,
And unto me the gain will be to come
To such a place as I may call a home,
Being now but dead and empty of delight,
And set in this sad place 'twixt dark and light."
Now at these words the tears ran down apace
For memory of the once familiar face,
And those old days, wherein, a little child
'Twixt awe and love beneath those eyes she smiled;
False pity moved her very heart, although
The guile of Venus she failed not to know,
But tighter round the casket clasped her hands,
And shut her eyes, remembering the commands
Of that dead queen; so safe to land she came.

And there in that grey country, like a flame
Before her eyes rose up the house of gold,
And at the gate she met the beast threefold,
Who ran to meet her open-mouthed, but she
Unto his jaws the cakes cast cunningly,
But trembling much; then on the ground he lay
Lolling his heads, and let her go her way;
And so she came into the mighty hall,
And saw those wonders hanging on the wall,
That all with pomegranates was covered o'er
In memory of the meal on that sad shore,
Whereby fair Enna was bewept in vain,
And this became a kingdom and a chain.
But on a throne, the Queen of all the dead
She saw therein with gold-embracéd head,
In royal raiment, beautiful and pale;
Then with slim hands her face did Psyche veil
In worship of her, who said, "Welcome here,
O messenger of Venus! thou art dear
To me thyself indeed, for of thy grace
And loveliness we know e'en in this place;
Rest thee then, fair one, on this royal bed
And with some dainty food shalt thou be fed;
Ho, ye who wait, bring in the tables now!"
Therewith were brought things glorious of show
On cloths and tables royally beseen,
By damsels each one fairer than a queen,
The very latchets of whose shoes were worth
The royal crown of any queen on earth;
But when upon them Psyche looked, she saw
That all these dainty matters without flaw
Were strange of shape and of strange-blended hues,
So every cup and plate did she refuse
Those lovely hands brought to her, and she said,
"O Queen, to me amidst my awe and dread
These things are nought, my message is not done,
So let me rest upon this cold grey stone,
And while my eyes no higher than thy feet
Are lifted, eat the food that mortals eat."
Therewith upon the floor she sat her down
And from the folded bosom of her gown
Drew forth her bread and ate, while with cold eyes
Regarding her 'twixt anger and surprise,
The Queen sat silent for awhile, then spoke,
"Why art thou here, wisest of living folk?
Depart in haste, lest thou shouldst come to be
Thyself a helpless thing and shadowy!
Give me the casket then, thou need'st not say
Wherefore thou thus hast passed the awful way;
Bide there, and for thy mistress shalt thou have
The charm that beauty from all change can save."
Then Psyche rose, and from her trembling hand
Gave her the casket, and awhile did stand
Alone within the hall, that changing light

From burning streams, and shadowy waves of night
Made strange and dread; till to her, standing there
The world began to seem no longer fair,
Life no more to be hoped for, but that place
The peaceful goal of all the hurrying race,
The house she must return to on some day.
Then sighing scarcely could she turn away
When with the casket came the Queen once more,
And said, "Haste now to leave this shadowy shore
Before thou changest; even now I see
Thine eyes are growing strange; thou look'st on me
E'en as the linnet looks upon the snake.
Behold, thy wisely-guarded treasure take,
And let thy breath of life no longer move
The shadows with the memories of past love."

But Psyche at that name, with quickened heart
Turned eagerly, and hastened to depart
Bearing that burden, hoping for the day;
Harmless, asleep, the triple monster lay,
The ferryman did set her in his boat
Unquestioned, and together did they float
Over the leaden water back again:
Nor saw she more those women bent with pain
Over their weaving, nor the fallen ass,
But swiftly up the grey road did she pass
And well-nigh now was come into the day
By hollow Tænarus, but o'er the way
The wings of Envy brooded all unseen;
Because indeed the cruel and fair Queen
Knew well how she had sped; so in her breast,
Against the which the dreadful box was pressed,
Grew up at last this foolish, harmful thought.
"Behold how far this beauty I have brought
To give unto my bitter enemy;
Might I not still a very goddess be
If this were mine which goddesses desire;
Yea, what if this hold swift consuming fire,
Why do I think it good for me to live,
That I my body once again may give
Into her cruel hands—come death! come life!
And give me end to all the bitter strife!"
Therewith down by the wayside did she sit
And turned the box round, long regarding it;
But at the last, with trembling hands, undid
The clasp, and fearfully raised up the lid;
But what was there she saw not, for her head
Fell back, and nothing she remembered
Of all her life, yet nought of rest she had,
The hope of which makes hapless mortals glad.
For while her limbs were sunk in deadly sleep
Most like to death, over her heart 'gan creep
Ill dreams; so that for fear and great distress
She would have cried, but in her helplessness
Could open not her mouth, or frame a word;
Although the threats of mocking things she heard,
And seemed, amidst new forms of horror bound,
To watch strange endless armies moving round,
With all their sleepless eyes still fixed on her,
Who from that changeless place should never stir.
Moveless she lay, and in that dreadful sleep
Scarce had the strength some few slow tears to weep.

And there she would have lain for evermore,
A marble image on the shadowy shore
In outward seeming, but within oppressed
With torments, knowing neither hope nor rest;
But as she lay the Phœnix flew along
Going to Egypt, and knew all her wrong,
And pitied her, beholding her sweet face,
And flew to Love and told him of her case;
And Love, in guerdon of the tale he told,
Changed all the feathers of his neck to gold,
And he flew on to Egypt glad at heart.
But Love himself gat swiftly for his part
To rocky Tænarus, and found her there
Laid half a furlong from the outer air.

But at that sight out burst the smothered flame
Of love, when he remembered all her shame,
The stripes, the labour, and the wretched fear,
And kneeling down he whispered in her ear,
"Rise, Psyche, and be mine for evermore,
For evil is long tarrying on this shore."
Then when she heard him, straightway she arose,
And from her fell the burden of her woes;
And yet her heart within her well-nigh broke,
When she from grief to happiness awoke;
And loud her sobbing was in that grey place,
And with sweet shame she covered up her face.
But her dear hands, all wet with tears, he kissed,
And taking them about each dainty wrist
Drew them away, and in a sweet voice said,
"Raise up again, O Psyche, that dear head,
And of thy simpleness have no more shame;
Thou hast been tried, and cast away all blame
Into the sea of woes that thou didst bear,
The bitter pain, the hopelessness, the fear—
Holpen a little, loved with boundless love
Amidst them all—but now the shadows move
Fast toward the west, earth's day is well-nigh done,
One toil thou hast yet; by to-morrow's sun
Kneel the last time before my mother's feet,
Thy task accomplished; and my heart, O sweet,
Shall go with thee to ease thy toilsome way:
Farewell awhile! but that so glorious day
I promised thee of old, now cometh fast,
When even hope thy soul aside shall cast,
Amidst the joy that thou shalt surely win."
So saying, all that sleep he shut within
The dreadful casket, and aloft he flew,
But slowly she unto the cavern drew
Scarce knowing if she dreamed, and so she came

Unto the earth where yet the sun did flame
Low down between the pine-trunks, tall and red,
And with its last beams kissed her golden head.

WITH what words Love unto the Father prayed
I know not, nor what deeds the balance weighed;
But this I know, that he prayed not in vain,
And Psyche's life the heavenly crown shall gain;
So round about the messenger was sent
To tell immortals of their King's intent,
And bid them gather to the Father's hall.
But while they got them ready at his call,
On through the night was Psyche toiling still,
To whom no pain nor weariness seemed ill
Since now once more she knew herself beloved;
But when the unresting world again had moved
Round into golden day, she came again
To that fair place where she had borne such pain,
And flushed and joyful in despite her fear,
Unto the goddess did she draw anear,
And knelt adown before her golden seat,
Laying the fatal casket at her feet;
Then at the first no word the Sea-born said,
But looked afar over her golden head,
Pondering upon the mighty deeds of fate;
While Psyche still, as one who well may wait,
Knelt, calm and motionless, nor said a word,
But ever thought of her sweet lovesome lord.
At last the Queen said, "Girl, I bid thee rise,
For now hast thou found favour in mine eyes;
And I repent me of the misery
That in this place thou hast endured of me,
Although because of it, thy joy indeed
Shall now be more, that pleasure is thy meed."
Then bending, on the forehead did she kiss
Fair Psyche, who turned red for shame and bliss;
But Venus smiled again on her, and said,
"Go now, and bathe, and be as well arrayed
As thou shouldst be, to sit beside my son;
I think thy life on earth is well-nigh done."

So thence once more was Psyche led away,
And cast into no prison on that day,
But brought unto a bath beset with flowers,
Made dainty with a fount's sweet-smelling showers,
And there being bathed, e'en in such fair attire
As veils the glorious Mother of Desire
Her limbs were veiled; then in the wavering shade,
Amidst the sweetest garden was she laid,
And while the damsels round her watch did keep,
At last she closed her weary eyes in sleep,
And woke no more to earth, for ere the day
Had yet grown late, once more asleep she lay
Within the West Wind's mighty arms, nor woke
Until the light of heaven upon her broke,
And on her trembling lips she felt the kiss
Of very Love, and mortal yet, for bliss
Must fall a-weeping. O for me! that I,
Who late have told her woe and misery,
Must leave untold the joy unspeakable
That on her tender wounded spirit fell!
Alas! I try to think of it in vain,
My lyre is but attuned to tears and pain,
How shall I sing the never-ending day?

Led by the hand of Love she took her way
Unto a vale beset with heavenly trees,
Where all the gathered gods and goddesses
Abode her coming; but when Psyche saw
The Father's face, she fainting with her awe
Had fallen, but that Love's arm held her up.
Then brought the cup-bearer a golden cup,
And gently set it in her slender hand,
And while in dread and wonder she did stand,
The Father's awful voice smote on her ear,
"Drink now, O beautiful, and have no fear!
For with this draught shalt thou be born again
And live for ever free from care and pain."

Then, pale as privet, took she heart to drink,
And therewithal most strange new thoughts did think,
And unknown feelings seized her, and there came
Sudden remembrance, vivid as a flame,
Of everything that she had done on earth,
Although it all seemed changed in weight and worth,
Small things becoming great, and great things small;
And godlike pity touched her therewithal
For her old self, for sons of men that die;
And that sweet new-born immortality
Now with full love her rested spirit fed.

Then in that concourse did she lift her head,
And stood at last a very goddess there,
And all cried out at seeing her grown so fair.

So while in heaven quick passed the time away,
About the ending of that lovely day,
Bright shone the low sun over all the earth
For joy of such a wonderful new birth.

OR e'er his tale was done, night held the earth;
Yea, the brown bird grown bold, as sounds of mirth
Grew faint and scanty, now his tale had done,
And by his mate abode the next day's sun;
And in those old hearts did the story move
Remembrance of the mighty deeds of love,
And with these thoughts did hopes of life arise,
Till tears unseen were in their ancient eyes,

And in their yearning hearts unspoken prayers,
And idle seemed the world with all its cares.

Few words they said; the balmy odorous wind
Wandered about, some resting-place to find;
The young leaves rustled 'neath its gentle breath,
And here and there some blossom burst his sheath,
Adding unnoticed fragrance to the night;
But, as they pondered, a new golden light
Streamed over the green garden, and they heard
Sweet voices sing some ancient poet's word
In praise of May, and then in sight there came
The minstrels' figures underneath the flame
Of scented torches passing 'twixt the trees,
And soon the dusky hall grew bright with these,
And therewithal they put all thought away,
And midst the tinkling harps drank deep to May.

THROUGH many changes had the May-tide passed,
The hope of summer oft had been o'ercast,
Ere midst the gardens they once more were met;
But now the full-leaved trees might well forget
The changeful agony of doubtful spring,
For summer pregnant with so many a thing
Was at the door; right hot had been the day
Which they amid the trees had passed away,
And now betwixt the tulip beds they went
Unto the hall, and thoughts of days long spent
Gathered about them, as some blossom's smell
Unto their hearts familiar tales did tell.

But when they well were settled in the hall.
And now behind the trees the sun 'gan fall,
And they as yet no history had heard,
Laurence, the Swabian priest, took up the word,
And said, "Ye know from what has gone before,
That in my youth I followed mystic lore,
And many books I read in seeking it,
And through my memory this same eve doth flit
A certain tale I found in one of these,
Long ere mine eyes had looked upon the seas;
It made me shudder in the times gone by,
When I believed in many a mystery
I thought divine, that now I think, forsooth,
Men's own fears made, to fill the place of truth
Within their foolish hearts; short is the tale,
And therefore will the better now avail
To fill the space before the night comes on,
And unto rest once more the world is won.

THE WRITING ON THE IMAGE.

ARGUMENT.

How on an image that stood anciently in Rome were written certain words, which none understood, until a Scholar, coming there, knew their meaning, and thereby discovered great marvels, but withal died miserably.

IN half-forgotten days of old,
As by our fathers we were told,
Within the town of Rome there stood
An image cut of cornel wood,
And on the upraised hand of it
Men might behold these letters writ—
"PERCUTE HIC:" which is to say,
In that tongue that we speak to-day,
"*Strike here!*" nor yet did any know
The cause why this was written so.

Thus in the middle of the square,
In the hot sun and summer air,
The snow-drift and the driving rain,
That image stood, with little pain,
For twice a hundred years and ten;
While many a band of striving men
Were driven betwixt woe and mirth
Swiftly across the weary earth,
From nothing unto dark nothing:
And many an emperor and king,
Passing with glory or with shame,
Left little record of his name,
And no remembrance of the face
Once watched with awe for gifts or grace.
Fear little, then, I counsel you,
What any son of man can do;
Because a log of wood will last
While many a life of man goes past,
And all is over in short space.

Now so it chanced that to this place
There came a man of Sicily,
Who when the image he did see,
Knew full well who, in days of yore,
Had set it there; for much strange lore,
In Egypt and in Babylon,
This man with painful toil had won;
And many secret things could do;
So verily full well he knew
That master of all sorcery
Who wrought the thing in days gone by;
And doubted not that some great spell
It guarded, but could nowise tell
What it might be. So, day by day,
Still would he loiter on the way,
And watch the image carefully,
Well mocked of many a passer-by.
And on a day he stood and gazed
Upon the slender finger, raised
Against a doubtful cloudy sky,
Nigh noontide; and thought, "Certainly
The master who made thee so fair
By wondrous art, had not stopped there,
But made thee speak, had he not thought
That thereby evil might be brought
Upon his spell." But as he spoke,
From out a cloud the noon sun broke
With watery light, and shadows cold:
Then did the Scholar well behold
How, from that finger carved to tell
Those words, a short black shadow fell
Upon a certain spot of ground,
And thereon, looking all around
And seeing none heeding, went straightway
Whereas the finger's shadow lay,
And with his knife about the place
A little circle did he trace;
Then home he turned with throbbing head,
And forthright gat him to his bed,
And slept until the night was late
And few men stirred from gate to gate.
So when at midnight he did wake,
Pickaxe and shovel did he take,
And, going to that now silent square,
He found the mark his knife made there,
And quietly with many a stroke
The pavement of the place he broke:
And so, the stones being set apart,
He 'gan to dig with beating heart,

And from the hole in haste he cast
The marl and gravel; till at last,
Full shoulder high, his arms were jarred,
For suddenly his spade struck hard
With clang against some metal thing:
And soon he found a brazen ring,
All green with rust, twisted, and great
As a man's wrist, set in a plate
Of copper, wrought all curiously
With words unknown though plain to see,
Spite of the rust; and flowering trees,
And beasts, and wicked images,
Whereat he shuddered: for he knew
What ill things he might come to do,
If he should still take part with these
And that Great Master strive to please.
But small time had he then to stand
And think, so straight he set his hand
Unto the ring, but where he thought
That by main strength it must be brought
From out its place, lo! easily
It came away, and let him see
A winding staircase wrought of stone,
Wherethrough the new-come wind did moan.
Then thought he, "If I come alive
From out this place well shall I thrive,
For I may look here certainly
The treasures of a king to see,
A mightier man than men are now.
So in few days what man shall know
The needy Scholar, seeing me
Great in the place where great men be,
The richest man in all the land?
Beside the best then shall I stand,
And some unheard-of palace have;
And if my soul I may not save
In heaven, yet here in all men's eyes
Will I make some sweet paradise,
With marble cloisters, and with trees
And bubbling wells, and fantasies,
And things all men deem strange and rare,
And crowds of women kind and fair,
That I may see, if so I please,
Laid on the flowers, or mid the trees
With half-clad bodies wandering.
There, dwelling happier than the king,
What lovely days may yet be mine!
How shall I live with love and wine,
And music, till I come to die!
And then—— Who knoweth certainly
What haps to us when we are dead?
Truly I think by likelihead
Nought haps to us of good or bad;
Therefore on earth will I be glad
A short space, free from hope or fear;
And fearless will I enter here
And meet my fate, whatso it be."

Now on his back a bag had he,
To bear what treasure he might win,
And therewith now did he begin
To go adown the winding stair;
And found the walls all painted fair
With images of many a thing,
Warrior and priest, and queen and king,
But nothing knew what they might be.
Which things full clearly could he see,
For lamps were hung up here and there
Of strange device, but wrought right fair,
And pleasant savour came from them.
At last a curtain, on whose hem
Unknown words in red gold were writ,
He reached, and softly raising it
Stepped back, for now did he behold
A goodly hall hung round with gold,
And at the upper end could see
Sitting, a glorious company:
Therefore he trembled, thinking well
They were no men, but fiends of hell.
But while he waited, trembling sore,
And doubtful of his late-learned lore,
A cold blast of the outer air
Blew out the lamps upon the stair
And all was dark behind him; then
Did he fear less to face those men
Than, turning round, to leave them there
While he went groping up the stair.
Yea, since he heard no cry or call
Or any speech from them at all,
He doubted they were images
Set there some dying king to please
By that Great Master of the art;
Therefore at last with stouter heart
He raised the cloth and entered in
In hope that happy life to win,
And drawing nigher did behold
That these were bodies dead and cold
Attired in full royal guise,
And wrought by art in such a wise
That living they all seemed to be,
Whose very eyes he well could see,
That now beheld not foul or fair,
Shining as though alive they were.
And midmost of that company
An ancient king that man could see,
A mighty man, whose beard of grey
A foot over his gold gown lay;
And next beside him sat his queen
Who in a flowery gown of green
A golden mantle well was clad,
And on her neck a collar had
Too heavy for her dainty breast;
Her loins by such a belt were prest
That whoso in his treasury
Held that alone, a king might be.

On either side of these, a lord
Stood heedfully before the board,
And in their hands held bread and wine
For service; behind these did shine
The armour of the guards, and then
The well-attiréd serving-men,
The minstrels clad in raiment meet;
And over against the royal seat
Was hung a lamp, although no flame
Was burning there, but there was set
Within its open golden fret
A huge carbuncle, red and bright;
Wherefrom there shone forth such a light
That great hall was as clear by it,
As though by wax it had been lit,
As some great church at Easter-tide.
Now set a little way aside,
Six paces from the daïs stood
An image made of brass and wood,
In likeness of a full-armed knight
Who pointed 'gainst the ruddy light
A huge shaft ready in a bow.
Pondering how he could come to know
What all these marvellous matters meant,
About the hall the Scholar went,
Trembling, though nothing moved as yet;
And for awhile did he forget
The longings that had brought him there
In wondering at these marvels fair;
And still for fear he doubted much
One jewel of their robes to touch.

But as about the hall he passed
He grew more used to them at last,
And thought, "Swiftly the time goes by,
And now no doubt the day draws nigh;
Folk will be stirring: by my head
A fool I am to fear the dead,
Who have seen living things enow,
Whose very names no man can know,
Whose shapes brave men might well affright
More than the lion in the night
Wandering for food." Therewith he drew
Unto those royal corpses two,
That on dead brows still wore the crown;
And midst the golden cups set down
The rugged wallet from his back,
Patched of strong leather, brown and black.
Then, opening wide its mouth, took up
From off the board, a golden cup
The King's dead hand was laid upon,
Whose unmoved eyes upon him shone
And recked no more of that last shame
Than if he were the beggar lame,
Who in old days was wont to wait
For a dog's meal beside the gate.
Of which shame nought our man did reck,
But laid his hand upon the neck
Of the slim Queen, and thence undid
The jewelled collar, that straight slid
Down her smooth bosom to the board.
And when these matters he had stored
Safe in his sack, with both their crowns,
The jewelled parts of their rich gowns,
Their shoes and belts, brooches and rings,
And cleared the board of all rich things,
He staggered with them down the hall.
But as he went his eyes did fall
Upon a wonderful green stone,
Upon the hall-floor laid alone;
He said, "Though thou art not so great
To add by much unto the weight
Of this my sack indeed, yet thou,
Certes, would make me rich enow,
That verily with thee I might
Wage one-half of the world to fight
The other half of it, and I
The lord of all the world might die;
I will not leave thee;" therewithal
He knelt down midmost of the hall,
Thinking it would come easily
Into his hand; but when that he
Gat hold of it, full fast it stack,
So fuming, down he laid his sack,
And with both hands pulled lustily,
But as he strained, he cast his eye
Back to the daïs; there he saw
The bowman image 'gin to draw
The mighty bowstring to his ear;
So, shrieking out aloud for fear,
Of that rich stone he loosed his hold
And catching up his bag of gold,
Gat to his feet: but ere he stood
The evil thing of brass and wood
Up to his ear the notches drew;
And clanging, forth the arrow flew,
And midmost of the carbuncle
Clanging again, the forked barbs fell,
And all was dark as pitch straightway.

So there until the judgment day
Shall come and find his bones laid low,
And raise them up for weal or woe,
This man must bide; cast down he lay;
While all his past life day by day
In one short moment he could see
Drawn out before him, while that he
In terror by that fatal stone
Was laid, and scarcely dared to moan.
But in a while his hope returned,
And then, though nothing he discerned,
He gat him up upon his feet,
And all about the walls he beat
To find some token of the door,

But never could he find it more ;
For by some dreadful sorcery
All was sealed close as it might be,
And midst the marvels of that hall
This Scholar found the end of all.

But in the town on that same night,
An hour before the dawn of light,
Such storm upon the place there fell,
That not the oldest man could tell
Of such another : and thereby
The image was burnt utterly,
Being stricken from the clouds above ;
And folk deemed that same bolt did move
The pavement where that wretched one
Unto his foredoomed fate had gone,
Because the plate was set again
Into its place, and the great rain
Washed the earth down, and sorcery
Had hid the place where it did lie.
So soon the stones were set all straight,
But yet the folk, afraid of fate,
Where once the man of cornel wood
Through many a year of bad and good
Had kept his place, set up alone
Great Jove himself, cut in white stone,
But thickly overlaid with gold.
"Which," saith my tale, "you may behold
Unto this day, although indeed
Some Lord or other, being in need,
Took every ounce of gold away."
But now, this tale in some past day
Being writ, I warrant all is gone,
Both gold and weather-beaten stone.

Be merry, masters, while ye may,
For men much quicker pass away.

THEY praised the tale, and for awhile they talked
Of other tales of treasure-seekers balked,
And shame and loss for men insatiate stored,
Nitocris' tomb, the Niblungs' fatal hoard,
The serpent-guarded treasures of the dead ;
Then of how men would be remembered
When they are gone ; and more than one could tell
Of what unhappy things therefrom befell ;
Or how by folly men have gained a name ;
A name indeed, not hallowed by the fame
Of any deeds remembered : and some thought,—
"Strange hopes and fears for what shall be but nought
To dead men ! better it would be to give
What things they may, while on the earth they live
Unto the earth, and from the bounteous earth
To take their pay of sorrow or of mirth,
Hatred or love, and get them on their way ;
And let the teeming earth fresh troubles make
For other men, and ever for their sake
Use what they left, when they are gone from it."

But while amid such musings they did sit,
Dark night being come, men lighted up the hall,
And the chief man for minstrelsy did call,
And other talk their dull thoughts chased away,
Nor did they part till night was mixed with day.

JUNE.

O JUNE, O June, that we desired so,
Wilt thou not make us happy on this day?
Across the river thy soft breezes blow
Sweet with the scent of beanfields far away,
Above our heads rustle the aspens grey,
Calm is the sky with harmless clouds beset,
No thought of storm the morning vexes yet.

See, we have left our hopes and fears behind
To give our very hearts up unto thee;
What better place than this then could we find
By this sweet stream that knows not of the sea,
That guesses not the city's misery,
This little stream whose hamlets scarce have names,
This far-off, lonely mother of the Thames?

Here then, O June, thy kindness will we take;
And if indeed but pensive men we seem,
What should we do? thou wouldst not have us wake
From out the arms of this rare happy dream
And wish to leave the murmur of the stream,
The rustling boughs, the twitter of the birds,
And all thy thousand peaceful happy words.

Now in the early June they deemed it good
That they should go unto a house that stood
On their chief river, so upon a day
With favouring wind and tide they took their way
Up the fair stream; most lovely was the time
Even amidst the days of that fair clime,
And still the wanderers thought about their lives,
And that desire that rippling water gives
To youthful hearts to wander anywhere.
So midst sweet sights and sounds a house most fair
They came to, set upon the river side
Where kindly folk their coming did abide;
There they took land, and in the lime-trees' shade
Beneath the trees they found the fair feast laid,
And sat, well pleased; but when the water-hen
Had got at last to think them harmless men,
And they with rest, and pleasure, and old wine,
Began to feel immortal and divine,
An elder spoke, "O gentle friends, the day
Amid such calm delight now slips away,
And ye yourselves are grown so bright and glad
I care not if I tell you something sad;
Sad, though the life I tell you of passed by,
Unstained by sordid strife or misery;
Sad, because though a glorious end it tells,
Yet on the end of glorious life it dwells,
And striving through all things to reach the best
Upon no midway happiness will rest."

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS.

ARGUMENT.

Admetus, King of Pheræ in Thessaly, received unwittingly Apollo as his servant, by the help of whom he won to wife Alcestis, daughter of Pelias: afterwards too, as in other things, so principally in this, Apollo gave him help, that when he came to die, he obtained of the Fates for him, that if another would die willingly in his stead, then he should live still; and when to every one else this seemed impossible, Alcestis gave her life for her husband's.

MIDST sunny grass-clad meads that slope adown
To lake Bœbeis stands an ancient town,
Where dwelt of old a lord of Thessaly,
The son of Pheres and fair Clymene,
Who had to name Admetus: long ago
The dwellers by the lake have ceased to know
His name, because the world grows old; but then
He was accounted great among great men;
Young, strong, and godlike, lacking nought at all
Of gifts that unto royal men might fall
In those old simple days, before men went
To gather unseen harm and discontent,
Along with all the alien merchandise
That rich folk need, too restless to be wise.

Now on the fairest of all autumn eves,
When midst the dusty, crumpled, dying leaves
The black grapes showed, and every press and vat
Was newly scoured, this King Admetus sat
Among his people, wearied in such wise
By hopeful toil as makes a paradise
Of the rich earth; for light and far away
Seemed all the labour of the coming day,
And no man wished for more than then he had,
Nor with another's mourning was made glad.
There in the pillared porch, their supper done,
They watched the fair departing of the sun;
The while the soft-eyed well-girt maidens poured
The joy of life from out the jars long stored
Deep in the earth, while little like a king,
As we call kings, but glad with everything,
The wise Thessalian sat and blessed his life,
So free from sickening fear and foolish strife.

But midst the joy of this festivity,
Turning aside he saw a man draw nigh,
Along the dusty grey vine-bordered road
That had its ending at his fair abode;
He seemed e'en from afar to set his face
Unto the King's adornéd reverend place,
And like a traveller went he wearily,
And yet as one who seems his rest to see.
A staff he bore, but nowise was he bent
With scrip or wallet; so withal he went
Straight to the King's high seat, and standing near,
Seemed a stout youth and noble, free from fear,
But peaceful and unarmed; and though ill clad,
And though the dust of that hot land he had
Upon his limbs and face, as fair was he
As any king's son you might lightly see,
Grey-eyed and crisp-haired, beautiful of limb,
And no ill eye the women cast on him.

But kneeling now, and stretching forth his hand,
He said, "O thou, the king of this fair land,
Unto a banished man some shelter give,
And help me with thy goods that I may live:
Thou hast good store, Admetus, yet may I,
Who kneel before thee now in misery,
Give thee more gifts before the end shall come
Than all thou hast laid safely in thine home."

"Rise up, and be my guest," Admetus said,
"I need no gifts for this poor gift of bread,
The land is wide, and bountiful enow.
What thou canst do, to-morrow thou shalt show,
And be my man, perchance; but this night rest
Not questioned more than any passing guest.
Yea, even if a great king thou hast spilt,
Thou shall not answer aught but as thou wilt."

Then the man rose and said, "O King, indeed
Of thine awarded silence have I need,
Nameless I am, nameless what I have done
Must be through many circles of the sun.
But for to-morrow—let me rather tell
On this same eve what things I can do well,
And let me put mine hand in thine and swear
To serve thee faithfully a changing year;

Nor think the woods of Ossa hold one beast
That of thy tenderest yearling shall make feast,
Whiles that I guard thy flocks; and thou shalt bear
Thy troubles easier when thou com'st to hear
The music I can make. Let these thy men
Witness against me if I fail thee, when
War falls upon thy lovely land and thee."
Then the King smiled, and said, "So let it be,
Well shalt thou serve me, doing far less than this,
Nor for thy service due gifts shalt thou miss:
Behold I take thy faith with thy right hand,
Be thou true man unto this guarded land.
Ho ye! take this my guest, find raiment meet
Wherewith to clothe him; bathe his wearied feet,
And bring him back beside my throne to feast."
But to himself he said, "I am the least
Of all Thessalians if this man was born
In any earthly dwelling more forlorn
Than a king's palace."
Then a damsel slim
Led him inside, nought loth to go with him,
And when the cloud of steam had curled to meet
Within the brass his wearied dusty feet,
She from a carved press brought him linen fair,
And a new-woven coat a king might wear,
And so being clad he came unto the feast,
But as he came again, all people ceased
What talk they held soever, for they thought
A very god among them had been brought;
And doubly glad the king Admetus was
At what that dying eve had brought to pass,
And bade him sit by him and feast his fill.
So there they sat till all the world was still,
And 'twixt the pillars their red torches' shine
Held forth unto the night a joyous sign.

So henceforth did this man at Pheræ dwell,
And what he set his hand to wrought right well,
And won much praise and love in everything,
And came to rule all herdsmen of the King;
But for two things in chief his fame did grow;
And first that he was better with the bow
Than any 'twixt Olympus and the sea;
And then that sweet, heart-piercing melody
He drew out from the rigid-seeming lyre,
And made the circle round the winter fire
More like to heaven than gardens of the May.
So many a heavy thought he chased away
From the King's heart, and softened many a hate,
And choked the spring of many a harsh debate;
And, taught by wounds, the snatchers of the wolds
Lurked round the gates of less well-guarded folds.
Therefore Admetus loved him, yet withal,
Strange doubts and fears upon his heart did fall;
For morns there were when he the man would meet,
His hair wreathed round with bay and blossoms sweet,
Gazing distraught into the brightening east,
Nor taking heed of either man or beast,
Or anything that was upon the earth.
Or sometimes, midst the hottest of the mirth,
Within the King's hall, would he seem to wake
As from a dream, and his stringed tortoise take
And strike the cords unbidden, till the hall
Filled with the glorious sound from wall to wall,
Trembled and seemed as it would melt away,
And sunken down the faces weeping lay
That erewhile laughed the loudest; only he
Stood upright, looking forward steadily
With sparkling eyes as one who cannot weep,
Until the storm of music sank to sleep.

But this thing seemed the doubtfullest of all
Unto the King, that should there chance to fall
A festal day, and folk did sacrifice
Unto the gods, ever by some device
The man would be away: yet with all this
His presence doubled all Admetus' bliss,
And happy in all things he seemed to live,
And great gifts to his herdsman did he give.
But now the year came round again to spring,
And southward to Iolchos went the King;
For there did Pelias hold a sacrifice
Unto the gods, and put forth things of price
For men to strive for in the people's sight;
So on a morn of April, fresh and bright,
Admetus shook the golden-studded reins,
And soon from windings of the sweet-banked lanes
The south wind blew the sound of hoof and wheel,
Clatter of brazen shields and clink of steel
Unto the herdsman's ears, who stood awhile
Hearkening the echoes with a godlike smile,
Then slowly gat him foldwards, murmuring,
"Fair music for the wooing of a King."
But in six days again Admetus came,
With no lost labour or dishonoured name;
A scarlet cloak upon his back he bare,
A gold crown on his head, a falchion fair
Girt to his side; behind him four white steeds,
Whose dams had fed full in Nisæan meads;
All prizes that his valiant hands had won
Within the guarded lists of Tyro's son.
Yet midst the sound of joyous minstrelsy
No joyous man in truth he seemed to be;
So that folk looking on him said, "Behold,
The wise King will not show himself too bold
Amidst his greatness: the gods too are great,
And who can tell the dreadful ways of fate?"

Howe'er it was, he gat him through the town
And midst their shouts at last he lighted down
At his own house, and held high feast that night;
And yet by seeming had but small delight
In aught that any man could do or say:
And on the morrow, just at dawn of day,
Rose up and clad himself, and took his spear,
And in the fresh and blossom-scented air
Went wandering till he reached Bœbeis' shore;
Yet by his troubled face set little store
By all the songs of birds and scent of flowers;
Yea, rather unto him the fragrant hours
Were grown but dull and empty of delight.
So going, at the last he came in sight
Of his new herdsman, who that morning lay
Close by the white sand of a little bay
The teeming ripple of Bœbeis lapped;
There he in cloak of white-wooled sheepskin wrapped
Against the cold dew, free from trouble sang,
The while the heifers' bells about him rang
And mingled with the sweet soft-throated birds
And bright fresh ripple: listen, then, these words
Will tell the tale of his felicity,
Halting and void of music though they be.

SONG.

O DWELLERS on the lovely earth,
Why will ye break your rest and mirth
To weary us with fruitless prayer;
Why will ye toil and take such care
For children's children yet unborn,
And garner store of strife and scorn
To gain a scarce-remembered name,
Cumbered with lies and soiled with shame?
And if the gods care not for you,
What is this folly ye must do
To win some mortal's feeble heart?
O fools! when each man plays his part,
And heeds his fellow little more
Than these blue waves that kiss the shore
Take heed of how the daisies grow.
O fools! and if ye could but know
How fair a world to you is given.

O brooder on the hills of heaven,
When for my sin thou drav'st me forth,
Hadst thou forgot what this was worth,
Thine own hand had made? The tears of men,
The death of threescore years and ten,
The trembling of the timorous race—
Had these things so bedimmed the place
Thine own hand made, thou couldst not know
To what a heaven the earth might grow
If fear beneath the earth were laid,
If hope failed not, nor love decayed.

He stopped, for he beheld his wandering lord,
Who, drawing near, heard little of his word,
And noted less; for in that haggard mood
Nought could he do but o'er his sorrows brood,
Whate'er they were, but now being come anigh,
He lifted up his drawn face suddenly,
And as the singer gat him to his feet,
His eyes Admetus' troubled eyes did meet,
As with some speech he now seemed labouring,
Which from his heart his lips refused to bring.
Then spoke the herdsman, "Master, what is this,
That thou, returned with honour to the bliss,
The gods have given thee here, still makest show
To be some wretch bent with the weight of woe?
What wilt thou have? What help there is in me
Is wholly thine, for in felicity
Within thine house thou still hast let me live,
Nor grudged most noble gifts to me to give."

"Yea," said Admetus, "thou canst help indeed,
But as the spring shower helps the unsown mead.
Yet listen: at Iolchos the first day
Unto Diana's house I took my way,
Where all men gathered ere the games began,
There, at the right side of the royal man,
Who rules Iolchos, did his daughter stand,
Who with a suppliant bough in her right hand
Headed the band of maidens; but to me
More than a goddess did she seem to be,
Nor fit to die; and therewithal I thought
That we had all been thither called for nought
But that her bridegroom Pelias might choose,
And with that thought desire did I let loose,
And striving not with Love, I gazed my fill,
As one who will not fear the coming ill:
Ah, foolish were mine eyes, foolish my heart,
To strive in such a marvel to have part!
What god shall wed her rather? no more fear
Than vexes Pallas vexed her forehead clear,
Faith shone from out her eyes, and on her lips
Unknown love trembled; the Phœnician ships
Within their dark holds nought so precious bring
As her soft golden hair; no daintiest thing
I ever saw was half so wisely wrought
As was her rosy ear; beyond all thought,
All words to tell of, her veiled body showed,
As, by the image of the Three-formed bowed,
She laid her offering down; then I drawn near
The murmuring of her gentle voice could hear,
As waking one hears music in the morn,
Ere yet the fair June sun is fully born;
And sweeter than the roses fresh with dew
Sweet odours floated round me, as she drew
Some golden thing from out her balmy breast
With her right hand, the while her left hand pressed
The hidden wonders of her girdlestead;
And when abashed I sank adown my head,

Dreading the god of Love, my eyes must meet
The happy bands about her perfect feet.
"What more? thou know'st perchance what thing love is?
Kindness, and hot desire, and rage, and bliss,
None first a moment; but before that day
No love I knew but what might pass away
When hot desire was changed to certainty,
Or not abide much longer; e'en such stings
Had smitten me, as the first warm day brings
When March is dying; but now half a god
The crowded way unto the lists I trod,
Yet hopeless as a vanquished god at whiles;
And hideous seemed the laughter and the smiles,
And idle talk about me on the way.
"But none could stand before me on that day,
I was as god-possessed, not knowing how
The King had brought her forth but for a show,
To make his glory greater through the land:
Therefore at last victorious did I stand
Among my peers, nor yet one well-known name
Had gathered any honour from my shame.
For there indeed both men of Thessaly,
Œtolians, Thebans, dwellers by the sea,
And folk of Attica and Argolis,
Arcadian woodmen, islanders, whose bliss
Is to be tossed about from wave to wave,
All these at last to me the honour gave,
Nor did they grudge it; yea, and one man said,
A wise Thessalian with a snowy head,
And voice grown thin with age, 'O Pelias,
Surely to thee no evil thing it was
That to thy house this rich Thessalian
Should come, to prove himself a valiant man
Amongst these heroes; for if I be wise
By dint of many years, with wistful eyes
Doth he behold thy daughter, this fair maid;
And surely, if the matter were well weighed,
Good were it both for thee and for the land
That he should take the damsel by the hand
And lead her hence, for ye near neighbours dwell;
What sayest thou, King, have I said ill or well?'
"With that must I, a fool, stand forth and ask
If yet there lay before me some great task
That I must do ere I the maid should wed;
But Pelias, looking on us, smiled and said,
'O neighbour of Larissa, and thou too,
O King Admetus, this may seem to you
A little matter; yea, and for my part
E'en such a marriage would make glad my heart;
But we the blood of Salmoneus who share
With godlike gifts great burdens also bear,
Nor is this maid without them, for the day
On which her maiden zone she puts away
Shall be her death-day, if she wed with one
By whom this marvellous thing may not be done,
For in the traces neither must steeds paw
Before my threshold, or white oxen draw
The wain that comes my maid to take from me,
Far other beasts that day her slaves must be:
The yellow lion 'neath the lash must roar,
And by his side unscared, the forest boar
Toil at the draught: what sayest thou then hereto,
O lord of Pheræ, wilt thou come to woo
In such a chariot, and win endless fame,
Or turn thine eyes elsewhere with little shame?
"What answered I? O herdsman, I was mad
With sweet love and the triumph I had had.
I took my father's ring from off my hand,
And said, 'O heroes of the Grecian land,
Be witnesses that on my father's name
For this man's promise, do I take the shame
Of this deed undone, if I fail herein;
Fear not, O Pelias, but that I shall win
This ring from thee, when I shall come again
Through fair Iolchos, driving that strange wain.
Else by this token, thou, O King, shalt have
Pheræ my home, while on the tumbling wave
A hollow ship my sad abode shall be.'
"So driven by some hostile deity,
Such words I said, and with my gifts hard won,
But little valued now, set out upon
My homeward way: but nearer as I drew
To mine abode, and ever fainter grew
In my weak heart the image of my love,
In vain with fear my boastful folly strove;
For I remembered that no god I was
Though I had chanced my fellows to surpass;
And I began to mind me in a while
What murmur rose, with what a mocking smile
Pelias stretched out his hand to take the ring,
Made by my drunkard's gift now twice a king:
And when unto my palace-door I came
I had awakened fully to my shame;
For certainly no help is left to me,
But I must get me down unto the sea
And build a keel, and whatso things I may
Set in her hold, and cross the watery way
Whither Jove bids, and the rough winds may blow
Unto a land where none my folly know,
And there begin a weary life anew."

Eager and bright the herdsman's visage grew
The while this tale was told, and at the end
He said, "Admetus, I thy life may mend,
And thou at lovely Pheræ still may dwell;
Wait for ten days, and then may all be well,
And thou to fetch thy maiden home may go
And to the King thy team unheard-of show.
And if not, then make ready for the sea
Nor will I fail indeed to go with thee,
And 'twixt the halyards and the ashen oar
Finish the service well begun ashore;

But meanwhile do I bid thee hope the best;
And take another herdsman for the rest,
For unto Ossa must I go alone
To do a deed not easy to be done."

Then springing up he took his spear and bow
And northward by the lake-shore 'gan to go;
But the King gazed upon him as he went,
Then, sighing, turned about, and homeward bent
His lingering steps, and hope began to spring
Within his heart, for some betokening
He seemed about the herdsman now to see
Of one from mortal cares and troubles free.
And so midst hopes and fears day followed day,
Until at last upon his bed he lay
When the grey, creeping dawn had now begun
To make the wide world ready for the sun
On the tenth day: sleepless had been the night
And now in that first hour of gathering light
For weariness he slept, and dreamed that he
Stood by the border of a fair, calm sea
At point to go a-shipboard, and to leave
Whatever from his sire he did receive
Of land or kingship; and withal he dreamed
That through the cordage a bright light there gleamed
Far off within the east; and nowise sad
He felt at leaving all he might have had,
But rather as a man who goes to see
Some heritage expected patiently.
But when he moved to leave the firm fixed shore,
The windless sea rose high and 'gan to roar,
And from the gangway thrust the ship aside,
Until he hung over a chasm wide
Vocal with furious waves, yet had no fear
For all the varied tumult he might hear,
But slowly woke up to the morning light
That to his eyes seemed past all memory bright;
And then strange sounds he heard, whereat his heart
Woke up to joyous life with one glad start,
And nigh his bed he saw the herdsman stand,
Holding a long white staff in his right hand,
Carved with strange figures; and withal he said,
"Awake, Admetus! loiter not a-bed,
But haste thee to bring home thy promised bride,
For now an ivory chariot waits outside,
Yoked to such beasts as Pelias bade thee bring;
Whose guidance thou shalt find an easy thing,
If in thine hands thou holdest still this rod,
Whereon are carved the names of every god
That rules the fertile earth; but having come
Unto King Pelias' well-adornéd home,
Abide not long, but take the royal maid,
And let her dowry in thy wain be laid,
Of silver and fine cloth and unmixed gold,
For this indeed will Pelias not withhold
When he shall see thee like a very god.
Then let thy beasts, ruled by this carven rod,
Turn round to Pheræ; yet must thou abide
Before thou comest to the streamlet's side
That feed its dykes; there, by the little wood
Wherein unto Diana men shed blood,
Will I await thee, and thou shalt descend
And hand-in-hand afoot through Pheræ wend;
And yet I bid thee, this night let thy bride
Apart among the womenfolk abide;
That on the morrow thou with sacrifice
For these strange deeds may pay a fitting price."

But as he spoke, with something like to awe,
His eyes and much-changed face Admetus saw,
And voiceless like a slave his words obeyed;
For rising up no more delay he made,
But took the staff and gained the palace-door
Where stood the beasts, whose mingled whine and roar
Had wrought his dream; there two and two they stood,
Thinking, it might be, of the tangled wood,
And all the joys of the food-hiding trees;
But harmless as their painted images
'Neath some dread spell; then, leaping up, he took
The reins in hand and the bossed leather shook,
And no delay the conquered beasts durst make
But drew, not silent; and folk just awake
When he went by, as though a god they saw,
Fell on their knees, and maidens come to draw
Fresh water from the fount sank trembling down,
And silence held the babbling wakened town.
So 'twixt the dewy hedges did he wend,
And still their noise afar the beasts did send,
His strange victorious advent to proclaim,
Till to Iolchos at the last he came,
And drew anigh the gates, whence in affright
The guards fled, helpless at the wondrous sight;
And through the town news of the coming spread
Of some great god; so that the scared priests led
Pale suppliants forth; who, in unmeet attire
And hastily-caught boughs and smouldering fire
Within their censers, in the market-place
Awaited him with many an upturned face,
Trembling with fear of that unnamed new god;
But through the midst of them his lions trod
With noiseless feet, nor noted aught their prey,
And the boars' hooves went pattering on the way,
While from their churning tusks the white foam flew
As raging, helpless, in the trace they drew.
But Pelias, knowing all the work of fate,
Sat in his brazen-pillared porch to wait
The coming of the King; the while the maid
In her fair marriage garments was arrayed,
And from strong places of his treasury
Men brought fine scarlet from the Syrian sea,

And works of brass, and ivory, and gold;
But when the strange-yoked beasts he did behold
Come through the press of people terrified,
Then he arose and o'er the clamour cried,
"Hail, thou, who like a very god art come
To bring great honour to my damsel's home;"
And when Admetus tightened rein before
The gleaming, brazen-wrought, half-opened door,
He cried to Pelias, "Hail, to thee, O King!
Let me behold once more my father's ring,
Let me behold the prize that I have won,
Mine eyes are wearying now to look upon."
"Fear not," he said, "the Fates are satisfied;
Yet wilt thou not descend and here abide,
Doing me honour till the next bright morn
Has dried the dew upon the new-sprung corn,
That we in turn may give the honour due
To such a man that such a thing can do,
And unto all the gods may sacrifice?"
"Nay," said Admetus, "if thou call'st me wise,
And like a very god thou dost me deem,
Shall I abide the ending of the dream
And so gain nothing? nay, let me be glad
That I at least one godlike hour have had
At whatsoever time I come to die,
That I may mock the world that passes by,
And yet forgets it." Saying this, indeed,
Of Pelias did he seem to take small heed,
But spoke as one unto himself may speak,
And still the half-shut door his eyes did seek,
Wherethrough from distant rooms sweet music came,
Setting his over-strainéd heart a-flame,
Because amidst the Lydian flutes he thought
From place to place his love the maidens brought.
Then Pelias said, "What can I give to thee
Who fail'st so little of divinity?
Yet let my slaves lay these poor gifts within
Thy chariot, while my daughter strives to win
The favour of the spirits of this place,
Since from their altars she must turn her face
For ever now; hearken, her flutes I hear,
From the last chapel doth she draw anear."
Then by Admetus' feet the folk 'gan pile
The precious things, but he no less the while
Stared at the door ajar, and thought it long
Ere with the flutes mingled the maidens' song,
And both grew louder, and the scarce-seen floor
Was fluttering with white raiment, and the door
By slender fingers was set open wide,
And midst her damsels he beheld the bride
Ungirt, with hair unbound and garlanded:
Then Pelias took her slender hand and said,
"Daughter, this is the man that takes from thee
Thy curse midst women. Think no more to be
Childless, unloved, and knowing little bliss!
But now behold how like a god he is,
And yet with what prayers for the love of thee
He must have wearied some divinity,
And therefore in thine inmost heart be glad
That thou 'mongst women such a man hast had."
Then she with wondering eyes that strange team saw
A moment, then as one with gathering awe
Might turn from Jove's bird unto very Jove,
So did she raise her grey eyes to her love.
But to her brow the blood rose therewithal,
And she must tremble, such a look did fall
Upon her faithful eyes, that none the less
Would falter aught, for all her shamefastness:
But rather to her lover's hungry eyes
Gave back a tender look of glad surprise,
Wherein love's flame began to flicker now.
Withal, her father kissed her on the brow,
And said, "O daughter, take this royal ring,
And set it on the finger of the King,
And come not back; and thou, Admetus, pour
This wine to Jove before my open door,
And glad at heart take back thine own with thee."
Then with that word Alcestis silently,
And with no look cast back, and ring in hand,
Went forth, and soon beside her love did stand,
Nor on his finger failed to set the ring;
And then a golden cup the city's King
Gave to him, and he poured and said, "O thou,
From whatsoever place thou lookest now,
What prayers, what gifts unto thee shall I give
That we a little time with love may live?
A little time of love, then fall asleep
Together, while the crown of love we keep."
So spake he, and his strange beasts turned about,
And heeded not the people's wavering shout
That from their old fear and new pleasure sprung,
Nor noted aught of what the damsels sung,
Or of the flowers that after them they cast,
But like a dream the guarded city passed,
And 'twixt the song of birds and blossoms' scent
It seemed for many hundred years they went,
Though short the way was unto Pheræ's gates.
Time they forgat, and gods, and men, and fates,
However nigh unto their hearts they were.
The woodland boars, the yellow lords of fear,
No more seemed strange to them, but all the earth
With all its changing sorrow and wild mirth
In that fair hour seemed new-born to the twain,
Grief seemed a play forgot, a pageant vain,
A picture painted, who knows where or when,
With soulless images of restless men;
For every thought but love was now gone by,
And they forgot that they should ever die.

But when they came anigh the sacred wood,
There, biding them, Admetus' herdsman stood,

At sight of whom those yoke-fellows unchecked
Stopped dead, and little of Admetus recked
Who now, as one from dreams not yet awake,
Drew back his love and did his wain forsake,
And gave the carven rod and guiding bands
Into the waiting herdsman's outstretched hands.
But when he would have thanked him for the thing
That he had done, his speechless tongue must cling
Unto his mouth, and why he could not tell.
But the man said, "No words! thou hast done well
To me, as I to thee; the day may come
When thou shalt ask me for a fitting home,
Nor shalt thou ask in vain; but hasten now,
And to thine house this royal maiden show,
Then give her to thy women for this night.
But when thou wakest up to thy delight
To-morrow, do all things that should be done,
Nor of the gods, forget thou any one,
And on the next day will I come again
To tend thy flocks upon the grassy plain.
"But now depart, and from thine home send here
Chariot and horse, these gifts of thine to bear
Unto thine house, and going, look not back
Lest many a wished-for thing thou com'st to lack.'
Then hand in hand together, up the road
The lovers passed unto the King's abode,
And as they went, the whining snort and roar
From the yoked beasts they heard break out once more
And then die off, as they were led away;
But whether to some place lit up by day,
Or, 'neath the earth, they knew not; for the twain
Went hastening on, nor once looked back again.
But soon the minstrels met them, and a band
Of white-robed damsels flowery boughs in hand,
To bid them welcome to that pleasant place.
Then they, rejoicing much, in no long space
Came to the brazen-pillared porch, whereon
From 'twixt the passes of the hills yet shone
The dying sun; and there she stood awhile
Without the threshold, a faint tender smile
Trembling upon her lips 'twixt love and shame,
Until each side of her a maiden came
And raised her in their arms, that her fair feet
The polished brazen threshold might not meet,
And in Admetus' house she stood at last.
But to the women's chamber straight she passed
Bepraised of all,—and so the wakeful night
Lonely the lovers passed e'en as they might.
But the next day with many a sacrifice,
Admetus wrought, for such a well-won prize,
A life so blest, the gods to satisfy,
And many a matchless beast that day did die
Upon the altars; nought unlucky seemed
To be amid the joyous crowd that gleamed
With gold and precious things, and only this
Seemed wanting to the King of Pheræ's bliss,
That all these pageants should be soon past by,
And hid by night the fair spring blossoms lie.

YET on the morrow-morn Admetus came,
A haggard man oppressed with grief and shame
Unto the spot beside Bœbeis' shore
Whereby he met his herdsman once before,
And there again he found him flushed and glad
And from the babbling water newly clad,
Then he with downcast eyes these words began,
"O thou, whatso thy name is, god or man,
Hearken to me; meseemeth of thy deed
Some dread immortal taketh angry heed.
"Last night the height of my desire seemed won,
All day my weary eyes had watched the sun
Rise up and sink, and now was come the night
When I should be alone with my delight;
Silent the house was now from floor to roof,
And in the well-hung chambers, far aloof,
The feasters lay; the moon was in the sky;
The soft spring wind was wafting lovingly
Across the gardens fresh scents to my sweet,
As, troubled with the sound of my own feet,
I passed betwixt the pillars, whose long shade
Black on the white red-veinéd floor was laid:
So happy was I that the briar-rose,
Rustling outside within the flowery close,
Seemed but Love's odorous wing—too real all seemed
For such a joy as I had never dreamed.
"Why do I linger, as I lingered not
In that fair hour, now ne'er to be forgot
While my life lasts?—Upon the gilded door
I laid my hand; I stood upon the floor
Of the bride-chamber, and I saw the bride,
Lovelier than any dream, stand by the side
Of the gold bed, with hands that hid her face:
One cry of joy I gave, and then the place
Seemed changed to hell as in a hideous dream.
"Still did the painted silver pillars gleam
Betwixt the scented torches and the moon;
Still did the garden shed its odorous boon
Upon the night; still did the nightingale
Unto his brooding mate tell all his tale:
But, risen 'twixt my waiting love and me,
As soundless as the dread eternity,
Sprung up from nothing, could mine eyes behold
A huge dull-gleaming dreadful coil that rolled
In changing circles on the pavement fair.
Then for the sword that was no longer there
My hand sank to my side; around I gazed,
And 'twixt the coils I met her grey eyes, glazed
With sudden horror most unspeakable;
And when mine own upon no weapon fell,

For what should weapons do in such a place,
Unto the dragon's head I set my face,
And raised bare hands against him, but a cry
Burst on mine ears of utmost agony
That nailed me there, and she cried out to me,
'O get thee hence; alas, I cannot flee!
They coil about me now, my lips to kiss.
O love, why hast thou brought me unto this?'
"Alas, my shame! trembling, away I slunk,
Yet turning saw the fearful coil had sunk
To whence it came, my love's limbs freed I saw,
And a long breath at first I heard her draw
As one redeemed, then heard the hard sobs come,
And wailings for her new accurséd home.
But there outside across the door I lay,
Like a scourged hound, until the dawn of day;
And as her gentle breathing then I heard
As though she slept, before the earliest bird
Began his song, I wandered forth to seek
Thee, O strange man, e'en as thou seest me, weak
With all the torment of the night, and shamed
With such a shame as never shall be named
To aught but thee—Yea, yea, and why to thee?
Perchance this ends all thou wilt do for me?—
What then, and have I not a cure for that?
Lo, yonder is a rock where I have sat
Full many an hour while yet my life was life,
With hopes of all the coming wonder rife.
No sword hangs by my side, no god will turn
This cloudless hazy blue to black, and burn
My useless body with his lightning flash;
But the white waves above my bones may wash,
And when old chronicles our house shall name
They may leave out the letters and the shame,
That make Admetus, once a king of men—
And how could I be worse or better then?"

As one who notes a curious instrument
Working against the maker's own intent,
The herdsman eyed his wan face silently,
And smiling for a while; and then said he,—
"Admetus, thou, in spite of all I said,
Hast drawn this evil thing upon thine head,
Forgetting her who erewhile laid the curse
Upon the maiden, so for fear of worse
Go back again; for fair-limbed Artemis
Now bars the sweet attainment of thy bliss;
So taking heart, yet make no more delay
But worship her upon this very day,
Nor spare for aught, and of thy trouble make
No semblance unto any for her sake;
And thick upon the fair bride-chamber floor
Strew dittany, and on each side the door
Hang up such poppy-leaves as spring may yield;
And for the rest, myself may be a shield
Against her wrath—nay, be thou not too bold
To ask me that which may not now be told.
Yea, even what thou deemest, hide it deep
Within thine heart, and let thy wonder sleep,
For surely thou shalt one day know my name,
When the time comes again that autumn's flame
Is dying off the vine-boughs, overturned,
Stripped of their wealth. But now let gifts be burned
To her I told thee of, and in three days
Shall I by many hard and rugged ways
Have come to thee again to bring thee peace.
Go, the sun rises and the shades decrease."
Then, thoughtfully, Admetus gat him back
Nor did the altars of the Huntress lack
The fattest of the flocks upon that day.
But when night came, in arms Admetus lay
Across the threshold of the bride-chamber,
And nought amiss that night he noted there,
But durst not enter, though about the door
Young poppy-leaves were twined, and on the floor,
Not flowered as yet, with downy leaves and grey,
Fresh dittany beloved of wild goats lay.
But when the whole three days and nights were done,
The herdsman came with rising of the sun,
And said, "Admetus, now rejoice again,
Thy prayers and offerings have not been in vain
And thou at last mayst come unto thy bliss;
And if thou askest for a sign of this,
Take thou this token; make good haste to rise,
And get unto the garden-close that lies
Below these windows sweet with greenery,
And in the midst a marvel shalt thou see,
Three white, black-hearted poppies blossoming,
Though this is but the middle of the spring."
Nor was it otherwise than he had said,
And on that day with joy the twain were wed,
And 'gan to lead a life of great delight;
But the strange woeful history of that night,
The monstrous car, the promise to the King,
All these through weary hours of chiselling
Were wrought in stone, and in Diana's wall
Set up, a joy and witness unto all.
But neither so would wingéd time abide,
The changing year came round to autumn-tide,
Until at last the day was fully come
When the strange guest first reached Admetus' home.
Then, when the sun was reddening to its end,
He to Admetus' brazen porch did wend,
Whom there he found feathering a poplar dart,
Then said he, "King, the time has come to part,
Come forth, for I have that to give thine ear
No man upon the earth but thou must hear."
Then rose the King, and with a troubled look
His well-steeled spear within his hand he took,
And by his herdsman silently he went
As to a peakéd hill his steps he bent

Nor did the parting servant speak one word,
As up they climbed, unto his silent lord:
Till from the top he turned about his head
From all the glory of the gold light, shed
Upon the hill-top by the setting sun;
For now indeed the day was well-nigh done,
And all the eastern vale was grey and cold;
But when Admetus he did now behold,
Panting beside him from the steep ascent,
One much-changed godlike look on him he bent,
And said, "O mortal, listen, for I see
Thou deemest somewhat of what is in me;
Fear not! I love thee, even as I can
Who cannot feel the woes and ways of man
In spite of this my seeming; for indeed
Now thou beholdest Jove's immortal seed;
And what my name is I would tell thee now,
If men who dwell upon the earth as thou
Could hear the name and live; but on the earth,
With strange melodious stories of my birth,
Phœbus men call me, and Latona's son.
"And now my servitude with thee is done,
And I shall leave thee toiling on thine earth,
This handful, that within its little girth
Holds that which moves you so, O men that die;
Behold, to-day thou hast felicity,
But the times change, and I can see a day
When all thine happiness shall fade away;
And yet be merry, strive not with the end!
Thou canst not change it; for the rest, a friend
This year has won thee who shall never fail:
But now indeed, for nought will it avail
To say what I may have in store for thee,
Of gifts that men desire; let these things be,
And live thy life, till death itself shall come,
And turn to nought the storehouse of thine home;
Then think of me; these feathered shafts behold,
That here have been the terror of the wold,
Take these, and count them still the best of all
Thine envied wealth, and when on thee shall fall
By any way the worst extremity,
Call upon me before thou com'st to die,
And lay these shafts with incense on a fire,
That thou mayst gain thine uttermost desire."

He ceased, but ere the golden tongue was still
An odorous mist had stolen up the hill,
And to Admetus first the god grew dim,
And then was but a lovely voice to him,
And then at last the sun had sunk to rest,
And a fresh wind blew lightly from the west
Over the hill-top, and no soul was there;
But the sad dying autumn field-flowers fair,
Rustled dry leaves about the windy place,
Where even now had been the godlike face,
And in their midst the brass-bound quiver lay.
Then, going further westward, far away,
He saw the gleaming of Peneus wan
'Neath the white sky, but never any man,
Except a grey-haired shepherd driving down
From off the long slopes to his fold-yard brown
His woolly sheep, with whom a maiden went,
Singing for labour done and sweet content
Of coming rest; with that he turned again,
And took the shafts up, never sped in vain,
And came unto his house most deep in thought
Of all the things the varied year had brought.

THENCEFORTH in bliss and honour day by day
His measured span of sweet life wore away.
A happy man he was; no vain desire
Of foolish fame had set his heart a-fire;
No care he had the ancient bounds to change;
Nor yet for him must idle soldiers range
From place to place about the burdened land,
Or thick upon the ruined cornfields stand;
For him no trumpets blessed the bitter war,
Wherein the right and wrong so mingled are,
That hardly can the man of single heart
Amid the sickening turmoil choose his part;
For him sufficed the changes of the year,
The god-sent terror was enough of fear
For him; enough the battle with the earth,
The autumn triumph over drought and dearth.
Better to him than wolf-moved battered shields,
O'er poor dead corpses, seemed the stubble-fields
Danced down beneath the moon, until the night
Grew dreamy with a shadowy sweet delight,
And with the high-risen moon came pensive thought,
And men in love's despite must grow distraught
And loiter in the dance, and maidens drop
Their gathered raiment, and the fifer stop
His dancing notes the pensive drone that chid,
And as they wander to their dwellings, hid
By the black shadowed trees, faint melody,
Mournful and sweet, their soft good-night must be.
Far better spoil the gathering vat bore in
Unto the pressing shed, than midst the din
Of falling houses in war's waggon lies
Besmeared with redder stains than Tyrian dyes;
Or when the temple of the sea-born one
With glittering crowns and gallant raiment shone,
Fairer the maidens seemed by no chain bound,
But such as amorous arms might cast around
Their lovely bodies, than the wretched band
Who midst the shipmen by the gangway stand;
Each lonely in her speechless misery,
And thinking of the worse time that shall be,
When midst of folk who scarce can speak her name,
She bears the uppermost of toil and shame.

Better to him seemed that victorious crown,
That midst the reverent silence of the town
He oft would set upon some singer's brow
Than was the conqueror's diadem, blest now
By lying priests, soon, bent and bloody, hung
Within the thorn, by linnets well besung,
Who think but little of the corpse beneath,
Though ancient lands have trembled at his breath.
But to this King—fair Ceres' gifts, the days
Whereon men sung in flushed Lyæus' praise
Tales of old time; the bloodless sacrifice
Unto the goddess of the downcast eyes
And soft persuading lips; the ringing lyre
Unto the bearer of the holy fire
Who once had been amongst them—things like these
Seemed meet to him men's yearning to appease.
These were the triumphs of the peaceful king.

And so, betwixt seed-time and harvesting,
With little fear his life must pass away;
And for the rest, he, from the self-same day
That the god left him, seemed to have some share
In that same godhead he had harboured there:
In all things grew his wisdom and his wealth,
And folk beholding the fair state and health
Wherein his land was, said, that now at last
A fragment of the Golden Age was cast
Over the place, for there was no debate,
And men forgot the very name of hate.
Nor failed the love of her he erst had won
To hold his heart as still the years wore on,
And she, no whit less fair than on the day
When from Iolchos first she passed away,
Did all his will as though he were a god,
And loving still, the downward way she trod.
Honour and love, plenty and peace, he had;
Nor lacked for aught that makes a wise man glad,
That makes him like a rich well-honoured guest
Scarce sorry when the time comes, for the rest,
That at the end perforce must bow his head.
And yet—was death not much rememberéd,
As still with happy men the manner is?
Or, was he not so pleased with this world's bliss,
As to be sorry when the time should come
When but his name should hold his ancient home
While he dwelt nowhere? either way indeed,
Will be enough for most men's daily need,
And with calm faces they may watch the world,
And note men's lives hither and thither hurled,
As folk may watch the unfolding of a play—
Nor this, nor that was King Admetus' way;
For neither midst the sweetness of his life
Did he forget the ending of the strife,
Nor yet for heavy thoughts of passing pain
Did all his life seem lost to him or vain,
A wasteful jest of Jove, an empty dream;
Rather before him did a vague hope gleam,
That made him a great-hearted man and wise,
Who saw the deeds of men with far-seeing eyes,
And dealt them pitying justice still, as though
The inmost heart of each man he did know;
This hope it was, and not his kingly place
That made men's hearts rejoice to see his face
Rise in the council hall; through this, men felt
That in their midst a son of man there dwelt
Like and unlike them, and their friend through all;
And still as time went on, the more would fall
This glory on the King's belovéd head,
And round his life fresh hope and fear were shed.

Yet at the last his good days passed away,
And sick upon his bed Admetus lay,
'Twixt him and death nought but a lessening veil
Of hasty minutes; yet did hope not fail,
Nor did bewildering fear torment him then,
But still, as ever, all the ways of men
Seemed clear to him: but he, while yet his breath
Still held the gateway 'gainst the arms of death,
Turned to his wife, who, bowed beside the bed,
Wept for his love, and dying goodlihead,
And bade her put all folk from out the room,
Then going to the treasury's rich gloom
To bear the arrows forth, the Lycian's gift.
So she, amidst her blinding tears, made shift
To find laid in the inmost treasury
Those shafts, and brought them unto him; but he,
Beholding them, beheld therewith his life,
Both that now past, with many marvels rife,
And that which he had hoped he yet should see.
Then spoke he faintly, "Love, 'twixt thee and me
A film has come, and I am fainting fast:
And now our ancient happy life is past;
For either this is death's dividing hand,
And all is done, or if the shadowy land
I yet escape, full surely if I live
The god with life some other gift will give,
And change me unto thee: e'en at this tide
Like a dead man among you all I bide,
Until I once again behold my guest,
And he has given me either life or rest:
Alas, my love! that thy too loving heart
Nor with my life or death can have a part.
O cruel words! yet death is cruel too:
Stoop down and kiss me, for I yearn for you
E'en as the autumn yearneth for the sun.
"O love, a little time we have been one,
And if we now are twain, weep not therefore;
For many a man on earth desireth sore
To have some mate upon the toilsome road,
Some sharer of his still increasing load,
And yet for all his longing and his pain
His troubled heart must seek for love in vain,

And till he dies still must he be alone—
But now, although our love indeed is gone,
Yet to this land as thou art leal and true,
Set now thine hand to what I bid thee do;
Because I may not die; rake up the brands
Upon the hearth, and from these trembling hands
Cast incense thereon, and upon them lay
These shafts, the relics of a happier day,
Then watch with me; perchance I may not die,
Though the supremest hour now draws anigh
Of life or death—O thou who madest me,
The only thing on earth alike to thee,
Why must I be unlike to thee in this?
Consider, if thou dost not do amiss
To slay the only thing that feareth death
Or knows its name, of all things drawing breath
Upon the earth: see now for no short hour,
For no half-halting death, to reach me slower
Than other men, I pray thee—what avail
To add some trickling grains unto the tale
Soon told, of minutes thou dost snatch away
From out the midst of that unending day
Wherein thou dwellest? rather grant me this
To right me wherein thou hast done amiss,
And give me life like thine for evermore."

So murmured he, contending very sore
Against the coming death; but she meanwhile,
Faint with consuming love, made haste to pile
The brands upon the hearth, and thereon cast
Sweet incense, and the feathered shafts at last;
Then, trembling, back unto the bed she crept,
And lay down by his side, and no more wept,
Nay scarce could think of death for very love
That in her faithful heart for ever strove
'Gainst fear and grief: but now the incense-cloud
The old familiar chamber did enshroud,
And on the very verge of death drawn close
Wrapt both their weary souls in strange repose,
That through sweet sleep sent kindly images
Of simple things; and in the midst of these,
Whether it were but parcel of their dream,
Or that they woke to it as some might deem,
I know not, but the door was opened wide,
And the King's name a voice long silent cried,
And Phœbus on the very threshold trod.
And yet in nothing liker to a god
Than when he ruled Admetus' herds; for he
Still wore the homespun coat men used to see
Among the heifers in the summer morn,
And round about him hung the herdsman's horn,
And in his hand he bore the herdsman's spear
And cornel bow, the prowling dog-wolf's fear;
Though empty of its shafts the quiver was.
He to the middle of the room did pass,
And said, "Admetus, neither all for nought
My coming to thee is, nor have I brought
Good tidings to thee; poor man, thou shalt live
If any soul for thee sweet life will give
Enforced by none: for such a sacrifice
Alone the fates can deem a fitting price
For thy redemption; in no battle-field,
Maddened by hope of glory life to yield,
To give it up to heal no city's shame
In hope of gaining long-enduring fame;
For whoso dieth for thee must believe
That thou with shame that last gift wilt receive,
And strive henceforward with forgetfulness
The honied draught of thy new life to bless.
Nay, and moreover such a glorious heart
Who loves thee well enough with life to part
But for thy love, with life must lose love too,
Which e'en when wrapped about in weeds of woe
Is godlike life indeed to such an one.
"And now behold, three days ere life is done
Do the Fates give thee, and I, even I,
Upon thy life have shed felicity
And given thee love of men, that they in turn
With fervent love of thy dear love might burn.
The people love thee and thy silk-clad breast,
Thine open doors, have given thee better rest
Than woods of spears or hills of walls might do,
And even now in wakefulness and woe
The city lies, calling to mind thy love,
Wearying with ceaseless prayers the gods above.
But thou—thine heart is wise enough to know
That they no whit from their decrees will go."

So saying, swiftly from the room he passed;
But on the world no look Admetus cast,
But peacefully turned round unto the wall
As one who knows that quick death must befall:
For in his heart he thought, "Indeed too well
I know what men are, this strange tale to tell
To those that live with me: yea, they will weep,
And o'er my tomb most solemn days will keep,
And in great chronicles will write my name,
Telling to many an age my deeds and fame.
For living men such things as this desire,
And by such ways will they appease the fire
Of love and grief: but when death comes to stare
Full in men's faces, and the truth lays bare,
How can we then have wish for anything,
But unto life that gives us all to cling?"
So said he, and with closed eyes did await,
Sleeping or waking, the decrees of fate.

But now Alcestis rose, and by the bed
She stood, with wild thoughts passing through her head.
Dried were her tears, her troubled heart and sore
Throbbed with the anguish of her love no more.
A strange look on the dying man she cast,
Then covered up her face and said, "O past!

Past the sweet times that I remember well!
Alas, that such a tale my heart can tell!
Ah, how I trusted him! what love was mine!
How sweet to feel his arms about me twine,
And my heart beat with his! what wealth of bliss
To hear his praises! all to come to this,
That now I durst not look upon his face,
Lest in my heart that other thing have place,
That which I knew not, that which men call hate.
"O me, the bitterness of God and fate!
A little time ago we two were one;
I had not lost him though his life was done,
For still was he in me—but now alone
Through the thick darkness must my soul make moan,
For I must die: how can I live to bear
An empty heart about, the nurse of fear?
How can I live to die some other tide,
And, dying, hear my loveless name outcried
About the portals of that weary land
Whereby my shadowy feet should come to stand.
"Alcestis! O Alcestis, hadst thou known
That thou one day shouldst thus be left alone,
How hadst thou borne a living soul to love!
Hadst thou not rather lifted hands to Jove,
To turn thine heart to stone, thy front to brass,
That through this wondrous world thy soul might pass,
Well pleased and careless, as Diana goes
Through the thick woods, all pitiless of those
Her shafts smite down? Alas! how could it be.
Can a god give a god's delights to thee?
Nay rather, Jove, but give me once again,
If for one moment only, that sweet pain,
The love I had while still I thought to live!
Ah! wilt thou not, since unto thee I give
My life, my hope?—But thou—I come to thee.
Thou sleepest: O wake not, nor speak to me!
In silence let my last hour pass away,
And men forget my bitter feeble day."

With that she laid her down upon the bed,
And nestling to him, kissed his weary head,
And laid his wasted hand upon her breast,
Yet woke him not; and silence and deep rest
Fell on that chamber. The night wore away
Mid gusts of wailing wind, the twilight grey
Stole o'er the sea, and wrought his wondrous change
On things unseen by night, by day not strange,
But now half seen and strange; then came the sun,
And therewithal the silent world and dun
Waking, waxed many-coloured, full of sound,
As men again their heap of troubles found,
And woke up to their joy or misery.
But there, unmoved by aught, those twain did lie,
Until Admetus' ancient nurse drew near
Unto the open door, and full of fear
Beheld them moving not, and as folk dead;
Then, trembling with her eagerness and dread,
She cried, "Admetus! art thou dead indeed?
Alcestis! livest thou my words to heed?
Alas, alas, for this Thessalian folk!"
But with her piercing cry the King awoke,
And round about him wildly 'gan to stare,
As a bewildered man who knows not where
He has awakened: but not thin or wan
His face was now, as of a dying man,
But fresh and ruddy; and his eyes shone clear,
As of a man who much of life may bear.
And at the first, but joy and great surprise
Shone out from those awakened, new-healed eyes;
But as for something more at last he yearned,
Unto his love with troubled brow he turned,
For still she seemed to sleep: alas, alas!
Her lonely shadow even now did pass
Along the changeless fields, oft looking back,
As though it yet had thought of some great lack.
And here, the hand just fallen from off his breast
Was cold; and cold the bosom his hand pressed.
And even as the colour lit the day
The colour from her lips had waned away;
Yet still, as though that longed-for happiness
Had come again her faithful heart to bless,
Those white lips smiled, unwrinkled was her brow,
But of her eyes no secrets might he know,
For, hidden by the lids of ivory,
Had they beheld that death a-drawing nigh.

Then o'er her dead corpse King Admetus hung,
Such sorrow in his heart as his faint tongue
Refused to utter; yet the just-past night
But dimly he remembered, and the sight
Of the Far-darter, and the dreadful word
That seemed to cleave all hope as with a sword:
Yet stronger in his heart a knowledge grew,
That nought it was but her fond heart and true
That all the marvel for his love had wrought,
Whereby from death to life he had been brought;
That dead, his life she was, as she had been
His life's delight while still she lived a queen.
And he fell wondering if his life were gain,
So wrapt as then in loneliness and pain;
Yet therewithal no tears would fill his eyes,
For as a god he was.
Then did he rise
And gat him down unto the Council-place,
And when the people saw his well-loved face
Then cried aloud for joy to see him there,
And earth again to them seemed blest and fair.
And though indeed they did lament in turn,
When of Alcestis' end they came to learn,

Scarce was it more than seeming, or, at least,
The silence in the middle of a feast,
When men have memory of their heroes slain.
So passed the order of the world again,
Victorious Summer crowning lusty Spring,
Rich Autumn faint with wealth of harvesting,
And Winter the earth's sleep; and then again
Spring, Summer, Autumn, and the Winter's pain;
And still and still the same the years went by.

But Time, who slays so many a memory,
Brought hers to light, the short-lived loving Queen;
And her fair soul, as scent of flowers unseen,
Sweetened the turmoil of long centuries.
For soon, indeed, Death laid his hand on these,
The shouters round the throne upon that day.
And for Admetus, he, too, went his way,
Though if he died at all I cannot tell;
But either on the earth he ceased to dwell,
Or else, oft born again, had many a name.
But through all lands of Greece Alcestis' fame
Grew greater, and about her husband's twined,
Lived, in the hearts of far-off men enshrined.
See I have told her tale, though I know not
What men are dwelling now on that green spot
Anigh Bœbeis, or if Pheræ still,
With name oft changed perchance, adown the hill
Still shows its white walls to the rising sun.
—The gods at least remember what is done.

STRANGE felt the wanderers at his tale, for now
Their old desires it seemed once more to show
Unto their altered hearts, when now the rest,
Most surely coming, of all things seemed best;—
—Unless, by death perchance they yet might gain
Some space to try such deeds as now in vain
They heard of amidst stories of the past;
Such deeds as they for that wild hope had cast
From out their hands—they sighed to think of it,
And how as deedless men they there must sit.

Yet, with the measured falling of that rhyme
Mingled the lovely sights and glorious time,
Whereby, in spite of hope long past away,
In spite of knowledge growing day by day
Of lives so wasted, in despite of death,
With sweet content that eve they drew their breath,
And scarce their own lives seemed to touch them more
Than that dead Queen's beside Bœbéis' shore;
Bitter and sweet so mingled in them both,
Their lives and that old tale, they had been loth,
Perchance, to have them told another way.—
So passed the sun from that fair summer day.

JUNE drew unto its end, the hot bright days
Now gat from men as much of blame as praise,
As rainless still they passed, without a cloud;
And growing grey at last, the barley bowed
Before the south-east wind. On such a day
These folk amid the trellised roses lay,
And careless for a little while at least,
Crowned with the mingled blossoms held their feast:
Nor did the garden lack for younger folk,
Who cared no more for burning summer's yoke
Than the sweet breezes of the April-tide;
But through the thick trees wandered far and wide
From sun to shade, and shade to sun again,
Until they deemed the elders would be fain
To hear the tale, and shadows longer grew:
Then round about the grave old men they drew,
Both youths and maidens; and beneath their feet
The grass seemed greener, and the flowers more sweet
Unto the elders, as they stood around.

So through the calm air soon arose the sound
Of one old voice as now a Wanderer spoke.
"O friends, and ye, fair loving gentle folk,
Would I could better tell a tale to-day;
But hark to this, which while our good ship lay
Within the Weser such a while agone,
A Fleming told me, as we sat alone
One Sunday evening in the Rose-garland,
And all the other folk were gone a-land
After their pleasure, like sea-faring men.
Surely I deem it no great wonder then
That I remember everything he said,
Since from that Sunday eve strange fortune led
That keel and me on such a weary way—
Well, at the least it serveth you to-day."

THE LADY OF THE LAND.

ARGUMENT.

A certain man having landed on an island in the Greek Sea, found there a beautiful damsel, whom he would fain have delivered from a strange and dreadful doom, but failing herein, he died soon afterwards.

IT happened once, some men of Italy
Midst the Greek Islands went a sea-roving,
And much good fortune had they on the sea:
Of many a man they had the ransoming,
And many a chain they gat, and goodly thing;
And midst their voyage to an isle they came,
Whereof my story keepeth not the name.

Now though but little was there left to gain,
Because the richer folk had gone away,
Yet since by this of water they were fain
They came to anchor in a land-locked bay,
Whence in a while some went ashore to play,
Going but lightly armed in twos or threes,
For midst that folk they feared no enemies.

And of these fellows that thus went ashore,
One was there who left all his friends behind;
Who going inland ever more and more,
And being left quite alone, at last did find
A lonely valley sheltered from the wind,
Wherein, amidst an ancient cypress wood,
A long-deserted ruined castle stood.

The wood, once ordered in fair grove and glade,
With gardens overlooked by terraces,
And marble-pavéd pools for pleasure made,
Was tangled now, and choked with fallen trees;
And he who went there, with but little ease
Must stumble by the stream's side, once made meet
For tender women's dainty wandering feet.

The raven's croak, the low wind choked and dreary,
The baffled stream, the grey wolf's doleful cry,
Were all the sounds that mariner could hear,
As through the wood he wandered painfully;
But as unto the house he drew anigh,
The pillars of a ruined shrine he saw,
The once fair temple of a fallen law.

No image was there left behind to tell
Before whose face the knees of men had bowed;
An altar of black stone, of old wrought well,
Alone beneath a ruined roof now showed
The goal whereto the folk were wont to crowd,
Seeking for things forgotten long ago,
Praying for heads long ages laid a-low.

Close to the temple was the castle-gate,
Doorless and crumbling; there our fellow turned,
Trembling indeed at what might chance to wait
The prey entrapped, yet with a heart that burned
To know the most of what might there be learned,
And hoping somewhat too, amid his fear,
To light on such things as all men hold dear.

Noble the house was, nor seemed built for war,
But rather like the work of other days,
When men, in better peace than now they are,
Had leisure on the world around to gaze,
And noted well the past times' changing ways;
And fair with sculptured stories it was wrought,
By lapse of time unto dim ruin brought.

Now as he looked about on all these things,
And strove to read the mouldering histories,
Above the door an image with wide wings,
Whose unclad limbs a serpent seemed to seize,
He dimly saw, although the western breeze,
And years of biting frost and washing rain,
Had made the carver's labour well-nigh vain.

But this, though perished sore, and worn away,
He noted well, because it seemed to be,
After the fashion of another day,
Some great man's badge of war, or armoury;
And round it a carved wreath he seemed to see:
But taking note of these things, at the last
The mariner beneath the gateway passed.

And there a lovely cloistered court he found,
A fountain in the midst o'erthrown and dry,
And in the cloister briers twining round
The slender shafts; the wondrous imagery
Outworn by more than many years gone by;
Because the country people, in their fear
Of wizardry, had wrought destruction here;

And piteously these fair things had been maimed;
There stood great Jove, lacking his head of might,
Here was the archer, swift Apollo, lamed;
The shapely limbs of Venus hid from sight
By weeds and shards; Diana's ankles light
Bound with the cable of some coasting ship;
And rusty nails through Helen's maddening lip.

Therefrom unto the chambers did he pass,
And found them fair still, midst of their decay,
Though in them now no sign of man there was,
And everything but stone had passed away
That made them lovely in that vanished day;
Nay, the mere walls themselves would soon be gone
And nought be left but heaps of mouldering stone.

But he, when all the place he had gone o'er,
And with much trouble clomb the broken stair,
And from the topmost turret seen the shore
And his good ship drawn up at anchor there,
Came down again, and found a crypt most fair
Built wonderfully beneath the greatest hall,
And there he saw a door within the wall,

Well-hinged, close shut; nor was there in that place
Another on its hinges, therefore he
Stood there and pondered for a little space,
And thought, "Perchance some marvel I shall see,
For surely here some dweller there must be,
Because this door seems whole, and new, and sound,
While nought but ruin I can see around."

So with that word, moved by a strong desire,
He tried the hasp, that yielded to his hand,
And in a strange place, lit as by a fire
Unseen but near, he presently did stand;
And by an odorous breeze his face was fanned,
As though in some Arabian plain he stood,
Anigh the border of a spice-tree wood.

He moved not for awhile, but looking round,
He wondered much to see the place so fair,
Because, unlike the castle above ground,
No pillager or wrecker had been there;
It seemed that time had passed on otherwhere,
Nor laid a finger on this hidden place,
Rich with the wealth of some forgotten race.

With hangings, fresh as when they left the loom,
The walls were hung a space above the head,
Slim ivory chairs were set about the room,
And in one corner was a dainty bed,
That seemed for some fair queen apparelléd;
And marble was the worst stone of the floor,
That with rich Indian webs was covered o'er.

The wanderer trembled when he saw all this,
Because he deemed by magic it was wrought;
Yet in his heart a longing for some bliss,
Whereof the hard and changing world knows nought,
Arose and urged him on, and dimmed the thought
That there perchance some devil lurked to slay
The heedless wanderer from the light of day.

Over against him was another door
Set in the wall; so, casting fear aside,
With hurried steps he crossed the varied floor,
And there again the silver latch he tried
And with no pain the door he opened wide,
And entering the new chamber cautiously
The glory of great heaps of gold could see.

Upon the floor uncounted medals lay,
Like things of little value; here and there
Stood golden caldrons, that might well outweigh
The biggest midst an emperor's copper-ware,
And golden cups were set on tables fair,
Themselves of gold; and in all hollow things
Were stored great gems, worthy the crowns of kings.

The walls and roof with gold were overlaid,
And precious raiment from the wall hung down;
The fall of kings that treasure might have stayed,
Or gained some longing conqueror great renown,
Or built again some god-destroyed old town;
What wonder, if this plunderer of the sea
Stood gazing at it long and dizzily?

But at the last his troubled eyes and dazed
He lifted from the glory of that gold,
And then the image, that well-nigh erased
Over the castle-gate he did behold,
Above a door well wrought in coloured gold
Again he saw; a naked girl with wings
Enfolded in a serpent's scaly rings.

And even as his eyes were fixed on it
A woman's voice came from the other side,
And through his heart strange hopes began to flit
That in some wondrous land he might abide
Not dying, master of a deathless bride,
So o'er the gold which now he scarce could see
He went, and passed this last door eagerly.

Then in a room he stood wherein there was
A marble bath, whose brimming water yet
Was scarcely still; a vessel of green glass
Half full of odorous ointment was there set
Upon the topmost step that still was wet,
And jewelled shoes and women's dainty gear,
Lay cast upon the varied pavement near.

In one quick glance these things his eyes did see,
But speedily they turned round to behold
Another sight, for throned on ivory
There sat a woman, whose wet tresses rolled
On to the floor in waves of gleaming gold,
Cast back from such a form as, erewhile shown
To one poor shepherd, lighted up Troy town.

Naked she was, the kisses of her feet
Upon the floor a dying path had made
From the full bath unto her ivory seat;
In her right hand, upon her bosom laid,
She held a golden comb, a mirror weighed
Her left hand down, aback her fair head lay
Dreaming awake of some long vanished day.

Her eyes were shut, but she seemed not to sleep,
Her lips were murmuring things unheard and low,
Or sometimes twitched as though she needs must weep
Though from her eyes the tears refused to flow,
And oft with heavenly red her cheek did glow,
As if remembrance of some half-sweet shame
Across the web of many memories came.

There stood the man, scarce daring to draw breath
For fear the lovely sight should fade away;
Forgetting heaven, forgetting life and death,
Trembling for fear lest something he should say
Unwitting, lest some sob should yet betray
His presence there, for to his eager eyes
Already did the tears begin to rise.

But as he gazed, she moved, and with a sigh
Bent forward, dropping down her golden head;
"Alas, alas! another day gone by,
Another day and no soul come," she said;
Another year, and still I am not dead!"
And with that word once more her head she raised,
And on the trembling man with great eyes gazed.

Then he imploring hands to her did reach,
And toward her very slowly 'gan to move
And with wet eyes her pity did beseech,
And seeing her about to speak, he strove
From trembling lips to utter words of love;
But with a look she stayed his doubtful feet,
And made sweet music as their eyes did meet.

For now she spoke in gentle voice and clear,
Using the Greek tongue that he knew full well;
"What man art thou, that thus hast wandered here,
And found this lonely chamber where I dwell?
Beware, beware! for I have many a spell;
If greed of power and gold have led thee on,
Not lightly shall this untold wealth be won.

"But if thou com'st here, knowing of my tale,
In hope to bear away my body fair,
Stout must thine heart be, nor shall that avail
If thou a wicked soul in thee dost bear;
So once again I bid thee to beware,
Because no base man things like this may see,
And live thereafter long and happily."

"Lady," he said, "in Florence is my home,
And in my city noble is my name;
Neither on peddling voyage am I come,
But, like my fathers, bent to gather fame;
And though thy face has set my heart a-flame
Yet of thy story nothing do I know,
But here have wandered heedlessly enow.

"But since the sight of thee mine eyes did bless,
What can I be but thine? what wouldst thou have?
From those thy words, I deem from some distress
By deeds of mine thy dear life I might save;
O then, delay not! if one ever gave
His life to any, mine I give to thee;
Come, tell me what the price of love must be?

"Swift death, to be with thee a day and night
And with the earliest dawning to be slain?
Or better, a long year of great delight,
And many years of misery and pain?
Or worse, and this poor hour for all my gain?
A sorry merchant am I on this day,
E'en as thou willest so must I obey."

She said, "What brave words! nought divine am I,
But an unhappy and unheard-of maid
Compelled by evil fate and destiny
To live, who long ago should have been laid
Under the earth within the cypress shade.
Hearken awhile, and quickly shalt thou know
What deed I pray thee to accomplish now.

"God grant indeed thy words are not for nought!
Then shalt thou save me, since for many a day
To such a dreadful life I have been brought:
Nor will I spare with all my heart to pay
What man soever takes my grief away;
Ah! I will love thee, if thou lovest me
But well enough my saviour now to be.

"My father lived a many years agone
Lord of this land, master of all cunning,
Who ruddy gold could draw from out grey stone,
And gather wealth from many an uncouth thing;
He made the wilderness rejoice and sing,
And such a leech he was that none could say
Without his word what soul should pass away.

"Unto Diana such a gift he gave,
Goddess above, below, and on the earth,
That I should be her virgin and her slave
From the first hour of my most wretched birth;
Therefore my life had known but little mirth
When I had come unto my twentieth year
And the last time of hallowing drew anear.

"So in her temple had I lived and died
And all would long ago have passed away,
But ere that time came, did strange things betide,
Whereby I am alive unto this day;
Alas, the bitter words that I must say!
Ah! can I bring my wretched tongue to tell
How I was brought unto this fearful hell.

"A queen I was, what gods I knew I loved,
And nothing evil was there in my thought,
And yet by love my wretched heart was moved
Until to utter ruin I was brought!
Alas! thou sayest our gods were vain and nought;
Wait, wait, till thou hast heard this tale of mine,
Then shalt thou think them devilish or divine.

"Hearken! in spite of father and of vow
I loved a man; but for that sin I think
Men had forgiven me—yea, yea, even thou;
But from the gods the full cup must I drink,
And into misery unheard of sink,
Tormented, when their own names are forgot,
And men must doubt e'er if they lived or not.

"Glorious my lover was unto my sight,
Most beautiful,—of love we grew so fain
That we at last agreed, that on a night
We should be happy, but that he were slain
Or shut in hold; and neither joy nor pain
Should else forbid that hoped-for time to be;
So came the night that made a wretch of me.

"Ah! well do I remember all that night,
When through the window shone the orb of June,
And by the bed flickered the taper's light,
Whereby I trembled, gazing at the moon:
Ah me! the meeting that we had, when soon
Into his strong, well-trusted arms I fell,
And many a sorrow we began to tell.

"Ah me! what parting on that night we had!
I think the story of my great despair
A little while might merry folk make sad;
For, as he swept away my yellow hair
To make my shoulder and my bosom bare,
I raised mine eyes, and shuddering could behold
A shadow cast upon the bed of gold:

"Then suddenly was quenched my hot desire
And he untwined his arms; the moon so pale
A while ago, seemed changed to blood and fire,
And yet my limbs beneath me did not fail,
And neither had I strength to cry or wail,
But stood there helpless, bare, and shivering,
With staring eyes still fixed upon the thing.

"Because the shade that on the bed of gold
The changed and dreadful moon was throwing down
Was of Diana, whom I did behold,
With knotted hair, and shining girt-up gown,
And on the high white brow, a deadly frown
Bent upon us, who stood scarce drawing breath,
Striving to meet the horrible sure death.

"No word at all the dreadful goddess said,
But soon across my feet my lover lay,
And well indeed I knew that he was dead;
And would that I had died on that same day!
For in a while the image turned away,
And without words my doom I understood,
And felt a horror change my human blood.

"And there I fell, and on the floor I lay
By the dead man, till daylight came on me,
And not a word thenceforward could I say
For three years; till of grief and misery,
The lingering pest, the cruel enemy,
My father and his folk were dead and gone,
And in this castle I was left alone:

"And then the doom foreseen upon me fell,
For Queen Diana did my body change
Into a fork-tongued dragon flesh and fell,
And through the island nightly do I range,
Or in the green sea mate with monsters strange,
When in the middle of the moonlit night
The sleepy mariner I do affright.

"But all day long upon this gold I lie
Within this place, where never mason's hand
Smote trowel on the marble noisily;
Drowsy I lie, no folk at my command,
Who once was called the Lady of the Land;
Who might have bought a kingdom with a kiss,
Yea, half the world with such a sight as this."

And therewithal, with rosy fingers light,
Backward her heavy-hanging hair she threw,
To give her naked beauty more to sight;
But when, forgetting all the things he knew,
Maddened with love unto the prize he drew,
She cried, "Nay, wait! for wherefore wilt thou die,
Why should we not be happy, thou and I?

"Wilt thou not save me? once in every year
This rightful form of mine that thou dost see
By favour of the goddess have I here
From sunrise unto sunset given me,
That some brave man may end my misery.
And thou—art thou not brave? can thy heart fail,
Whose eyes e'en now are weeping at my tale?

"Then listen! when this day is overpast,
A fearful monster shall I be again,
And thou mayst be my saviour at the last;
Unless, once more, thy words are nought and vain.
If thou of love and sovereignty art fain,
Come thou next morn, and when thou seest here
A hideous dragon, have thereof no fear,

"But take the loathsome head up in thine hands,
And kiss it, and be master presently
Of twice the wealth that is in all the lands,
From Cathay to the head of Italy;
And master also, if it pleaseth thee,
Of all thou praisest as so fresh and bright,
Of what thou callest crown of all delight.

"Ah! with what joy then shall I see again
The sunlight on the green grass and the trees,
And hear the clatter of the summer rain,
And see the joyous folk beyond the seas.
Ah, me! to hold my child upon my knees,
After the weeping of unkindly tears,
And all the wrongs of these four hundred years.

"Go now, go quick! leave this grey heap of stone;
And from thy glad heart think upon thy way,
How I shall love thee—yea, love thee alone,
That bringest me from dark death unto day;
For this shall be thy wages and thy pay;
Unheard-of wealth, unheard-of love is near,
If thou hast heart a little dread to bear."

Therewith she turned to go; but he cried out,
"Ah! wilt thou leave me then without one kiss,
To slay the very seeds of fear and doubt,
That glad to-morrow may bring certain bliss?
Hast thou forgotten how love lives by this,
The memory of some hopeful close embrace,
Low whispered words within some lonely place?"

But she, when his bright glittering eyes she saw,
And burning cheeks, cried out, "Alas, alas!
Must I be quite undone, and wilt thou draw
A worse fate on me than the first one was?
O haste thee from this fatal place to pass!
Yet, ere thou goest, take this, lest thou shouldst deem
Thou hast been fooled by some strange midday dream."

So saying, blushing like a new-kissed maid,
From off her neck a little gem she drew,
That, 'twixt those snowy rose-tinged hillocks laid,
The secrets of her glorious beauty knew;
And ere he well perceived what she would do,
She touched his hand, the gem within it lay,
And, turning, from his sight she fled away.

Then at the doorway where her rosy heel
Had glanced and vanished, he awhile did stare,
And still upon his hand he seemed to feel
The varying kisses of her fingers fair;
Then turned he toward the dreary crypt and bare,
And dizzily throughout the castle passed,
Till by the ruined fane he stood at last.

Then weighing still the gem within his hand,
He stumbled backward though the cypress wood,
Thinking the while of some strange lovely land,
Where all his life should be most fair and good
Till on the valley's wall of hills he stood,
And slowly thence passed down unto the bay
Red with the death of that bewildering day.

THE next day came, and he, who all the night
Had ceaselessly been turning in his bed,
Arose and clad himself in armour bright,
And many a danger he remembered;
Storming of towns, lone sieges full of dread,
That with renown his heart had borne him through
And this thing seemed a little thing to do.

So on he went, and on the way he thought
Of all the glorious things of yesterday,
Nought of the price whereat they must be bought,
But ever to himself did softly say,
"No roaming now, my wars are passed away;
No long dull days devoid of happiness,
When such a love my yearning heart shall bless."

Thus to the castle did he come at last,
But when unto the gateway he drew near,
And underneath its ruined archway passed
Into the court, a strange noise did he hear,
And through his heart there shot a pang of fear;

Trembling, he gat his sword into his hand,
And midmost of the cloisters took his stand.

But for a while that unknown noise increased,
A rattling, that with strident roars did blend,
And whining moans; but suddenly it ceased,
A fearful thing stood at the cloister's end,
And eyed him for a while, then 'gan to wend
Adown the cloisters, and began again
That rattling, and the moan like fiends in pain.

And as it came on towards him, with its teeth
The body of a slain goat did it tear,
The blood whereof in its hot jaws did seethe,
And on its tongue he saw the smoking hair;
Then his heart sank, and standing trembling there,
Throughout his mind wild thoughts and fearful ran,
"Some fiend she was," he said, "the bane of man."

Yet he abode her still, although his blood
Curdled within him: the thing dropped the goat,
And creeping on, came close to where he stood,
And raised its head to him, and wrinkled throat,
Then he cried out and wildly at her smote,
Shutting his eyes, and turned and from the place
Ran swiftly, with a white and ghastly face.

But little things rough stones and tree-trunks seemed,
And if he fell, he rose and ran on still;
No more he felt his hurts than if he dreamed,
He made no stay for valley or steep hill,
Heedless he dashed through many a foaming rill,
Until he came unto the ship at last
And with no word into the deep hold passed.

Meanwhile the dragon, seeing him clean gone,
Followed him not, but crying horribly,
Caught up within her jaws a block of stone
And ground it into powder, then turned she,
With cries that folk could hear far out at sea,
And reached the treasure set apart of old,
To brood above the hidden heaps of gold.

Yet was she seen again on many a day
By some half-waking mariner, or herd,
Playing amid the ripples of the bay,
Or on the hills making all things afeard,
Or in the wood, that did that castle gird,
But never any man again durst go
To seek her woman's form, and end her woe.

As for the man, who knows what things he bore?
What mournful faces peopled the sad night,
What wailings vexed him with reproaches sore,
What images of that nigh-gained delight!
What dreamed caresses from soft hands and white,
Turning to horrors ere they reached the best:
What struggles vain, what shame, what huge unrest?

No man he knew, three days he lay and raved,
And cried for death, until a lethargy
Fell on him, and his fellows thought him saved;
But on the third night he awoke to die;
And at Byzantium doth his body lie
Between two blossoming pomegranate trees,
Within the churchyard of the Genoese.

A MOMENT'S silence as his tale had end,
And then the wind of that June night did blend
Their varied voices, as of that and this
They fell to talk: of those fair islands' bliss
They knew in other days, of hope they had
To live there long an easy life and glad,
With nought to vex them; and the younger men
Began to nourish strange dreams even then
Of sailing east, as these had once sailed west;
Because the story of that luckless quest
With hope, not fear, had filled their joyous hearts
And made them dream of new and noble parts
That they might act; of raising up the name
Their fathers bore, and winning boundless fame.
These too with little patience seemed to hear,
That story end with shame and grief and fear;
A little thing the man had had to do,
They said, if longing burned within him so.
But at their words the older men must bow
Their heads, and, smiling, somewhat thoughtful grow,
Remembering well how fear in days gone by
Had dealt with them, and poisoned wretchedly
Good days, good deeds, and longings for all good:
Yet on the evil times they would not brood,
But sighing, strove to raise the weight of years,
And no more memory of their hopes and fears
They nourished, but such gentle thoughts as fed
The pensiveness which that sweet season bred.

JULY.

FAIR was the morn to-day, the blossom's scent
Floated across the fresh grass, and the bees
With low vexed song from rose to lily went;
A gentle wind was in the heavy trees,
And thine eyes shone with joyous memories;
Fair was the early morn, and fair wert thou,
And I was happy—Ah, be happy now!

Peace and content without us, love within
That hour there was, now thunder and wild rain
Have wrapped the cowering world, and foolish sin,
And nameless pride, have made us wise in vain;
Ah, love! although the morn shall come again,
And on new rose-buds the new sun shall smile,
Can we regain what we have lost meanwhile?

E'en now the west grows clear of storm and
threat,
But midst the lightning did the fair sun die—
—Ah, he shall rise again for ages yet,
He cannot waste his life—but thou and I—
Who knows if next morn this felicity
My lips may feel, or if thou still shalt live
This seal of love renewed once more to give?

WITHIN a lovely valley, watered well
With flowery streams, the July feast befell,
And there within the Chief-priest's fair abode
They cast aside their trouble's heavy load,
Scarce made aweary by the sultry day.
The earth no longer laboured; shaded lay
The sweet-breathed kine; across the sunny vale,
From hill to hill, the wandering rook did sail,
Lazily croaking, midst his dreams of spring.
Nor more awake the pink-foot dove did cling
Unto the beech-bough, murmuring now and then.
All rested but the restless sons of men
And the great sun that wrought this happiness,
And all the vale with fruitful hopes did bless.
So in a marble chamber bright with flowers,
The old men feasted through the fresher hours,
And at the hottest time of all the day
When now the sun was on his downward way,
Sat listening to a tale an elder told,
New to his fathers while they yet did hold
The cities of some far-off Grecian isle,
Though in the heavens the cloud of force and guile
Was gathering dark that sent them o'er the sea
To win new lands for their posterity.

THE SON OF CRŒSUS.

ARGUMENT.

Crœsus, King of Lydia, dreamed that he saw his son slain by an iron weapon, and though by every means he strove to avert this doom from him, yet thus it happened, for his son was slain by the hand of the man who seemed least of all likely to do the deed.

OF Crœsus tells my tale, a king of old
In Lydia, ere the Mede fell on the land,
A man made mighty by great heaps of gold,
Feared for the myriads strong of heart and hand
That 'neath his banners wrought out his command,
And though his latter ending happed on ill,
Yet first of every joy he had his fill.

Two sons he had, and one was dumb from birth;
The other one, that Atys had to name,
Grew up a fair youth, and of might and worth,
And well it seemed the race wherefrom he came
From him should never get reproach or shame:
But yet no stroke he struck before his death,
In no war-shout he spent his latest breath.

Now Crœsus, lying on his bed anight,
Dreamed that he saw this dear son laid a-low,
And folk lamenting he was slain outright,
And that some iron thing had dealt the blow;
By whose hand guided he could nowise know,
Or if in peace by traitors it were done,
Or in some open war not yet begun.

Three times one night this vision broke his sleep,
So that at last he rose up from his bed,
That he might ponder how he best might keep
The threatened danger from so dear a head;
And, since he now was old enough to wed,
The King sent men to search the lands around,
Until some matchless maiden should be found;

That in her arms this Atys might forget
The praise of men, and fame of history,
Whereby full many a field has been made wet
With blood of men, and many a deep green sea
Been reddened therewithal, and yet shall be;
That her sweet voice might drown the people's praise,
Her eyes make bright the uneventful days.

So when at last a wonder they had brought,
From some sweet land down by the ocean's rim,
Than whom no fairer could by man be thought,
And ancient dames, scanning her limb by limb,
Had said that she was fair enough for him,
To her was Atys married with much show,
And looked to dwell with her in bliss enow.

And in meantime afield he never went,
Either to hunting or the frontier war,
No dart was cast, nor any engine bent
Anigh him, and the Lydian men afar
Must rein their steeds, and the bright blossoms mar
If they have any lust of tourney now;
And in far meadows must they bend the bow.

And also through the palace everywhere
The swords and spears were taken from the wall
That long with honour had been hanging there,
And from the golden pillars of the hall;
Lest by mischance some sacred blade should fall,
And in its falling bring revenge at last
For many a fatal battle overpast.

And every day King Crœsus wrought with care
To save his dear son from that threatened end,
And many a beast he offered up with prayer
Unto the gods, and much of wealth did spend,
That they so prayed might yet perchance defend
That life, until at least that he were dead,
With earth laid heavy on his unseeing head.

But in the midst even of the wedding feast
There came a man, who by the golden hall
Sat down upon the steps, and man or beast
He heeded not, but there against the wall
He leaned his head, speaking no word at all,
Till, with his son and son's wife, came the King,
And then unto his gown the man did cling.

"What man art thou?" the King said to him then,
"That in such guise thou prayest on thy knee;
Hast thou some fell foe here among my men?
Or hast thou done an ill deed unto me?
Or has thy wife been carried over sea?
Or hast thou on this day great need of gold?
Or say, why else thou now art grown so bold."

"O King," he said, "I ask no gold to-day,
And though indeed thy greatness drew me here,
No wrong have I that thou couldst wipe away;
And nought of mine the pirate folk did bear
Across the sea; none of thy folk I fear:
But all the gods are now mine enemies,
Therefore I kneel before thee on my knees.

"For as with mine own brother on a day
Within the running place at home I played,
Unwittingly I smote him such-a-way
That dead upon the green grass he was laid;
Half-dead myself I fled away dismayed,
Wherefore I pray thee help me in my need,
And purify my soul of this sad deed.

"If of my name and country thou wouldst know,
In Phrygia yet my father is a king,
Gordius, the son of Midas, rich enow
In corn and cattle, golden cup and ring;
And mine own name before I did this thing
Was called Adrastus, whom, in street and hall,
The slayer of his brother men now call."

"Friend," said the King, "have thou no fear of me;
For though, indeed, I am right happy now,
Yet well I know this may not always be,
And I may chance some day to kneel full low,
And to some happy man mine head to bow
With prayers to do a greater thing than this,
Dwell thou with us, and win again thy bliss.

"For in this city men in sport and play
Forget the trouble that the gods have sent;
Who therewithal send wine, and many a may
As fair as she for whom the Trojan went;
And many a dear delight besides have lent,
Which, whoso is well loved of them shall keep
Till in forgetful death he falls asleep.

"Therefore to-morrow shall those rites be done
That kindred blood demands that thou hast shed,
That if the mouth of thine own mother's son
Did hap to curse thee ere he was quite dead,
The curse may lie the lighter on thine head,
Because the flower-crowned head of many a beast
Has fallen voiceless in our glorious feast."

Then did Adrastus rise and thank the King,
And the next day when yet low was the sun,
The sacrifice and every other thing
That unto these dread rites belonged, was done;
And there Adrastus dwelt, hated of none,
And loved of many, and the King loved him,
For brave and wise he was and strong of limb.

But chiefly amongst all did Atys love
The luckless stranger, whose fair tales of war
The Lydian's heart abundantly did move,
And much they talked of wandering out afar
Some day, to lands where many marvels are,
With still the Phrygian through all things to be
The leader unto all felicity.

Now at this time folk came unto the King
Who on a forest's borders dwelling were,
Wherein there roamed full many a dangerous thing,
As wolf and wild bull, lion and brown bear;
But chiefly in that forest was the lair
Of a great boar that no man could withstand,
And many a woe he wrought upon the land.

Since long ago that men in Calydon
Held chase, no beast like him had once been seen.
He ruined vineyards lying in the sun,
After his harvesting the men must glean
What he had left; right glad they had not been
Among the tall stalks of the ripening wheat,
The fell destroyer's fatal tusks to meet.

For often would the lonely man entrapped,
In vain from his dire fury strive to hide
In some thick hedge, and other whiles it happed
Some careless stranger by his place would ride,
And the tusks smote his fallen horse's side,
And what help then to such a wretch could come
With sword he could not draw, and far from home?

Or else girls, sent their water-jars to fill,
Would come back pale, too terrified to cry,
Because they had but seen him from the hill;
Or else again with side rent wretchedly,
Some hapless damsel midst the brake would lie.
Shortly to say, there neither man nor maid
Was safe afield whether they wrought or played.

Therefore were come these dwellers by the wood
To pray the King brave men to them to send,
That they might live; and if he deemed it good,
That Atys with the other knights should wend,
They thought their grief the easier should have end;
For both by gods and men they knew him loved,
And easily by hope of glory moved.

"O Sire," they said, "thou know'st how Hercules
Was not content to wait till folk asked aid,
But sought the pests among their guarded trees;
Thou know'st what name the Theban Cadmus made,
And how the bull of Marathon was laid
Dead on the fallows of the Athenian land,
And how folk worshipped Atalanta's hand.

"Fair would thy son's name look upon the roll
Wherein such noble deeds as this are told;
And great delight shall surely fill thy soul,
Thinking upon his deeds when thou art old,
And thy brave heart is waxen faint and cold:
Dost thou not know, O King, how men will strive
That they, when dead, still in their sons may live?"

He shuddered as they spoke, because he thought,
Most certainly a winning tale is this
To draw him from the net where he is caught,
For hearts of men grow weary of all bliss;
Nor is he one to be content with his,
If he should hear the trumpet-blast of fame
And far-off people calling on his name.

"Good friends," he said, "go, get ye back again,
And doubt not I will send you men to slay
This pest ye fear: yet shall your prayer be vain
If ye with any other speak to-day;
And for my son, with me he needs must stay,
For mighty cares oppress the Lydian land.
Fear not, for ye shall have a noble band."

And with that promise must they be content,
And so departed, having feasted well.
And yet some god or other ere they went,
If they were silent, this their tale must tell
To more than one man; therefore it befell,
That at the last Prince Atys knew the thing,
And came with angry eyes unto the King.

"Father," he said, "since when am I grown vile?
Since when am I grown helpless of my hands?
Or else what folk, with words enwrought with guile,
Thine ears have poisoned; that when far-off lands
My fame might fill, by thy most strange commands
I needs must stay within this slothful home,
Whereto would God that I had never come?

"What! wilt thou take mine honour quite away?
Wouldst thou, that, as with her I just have wed
I sit among thy folk at end of day,
She should be ever turning round her head
To watch some man for war apparelléd,
Because he wears a sword that he may use,
Which grace to me thou ever wilt refuse?

"Or dost thou think, when thou hast run thy race
And thou art gone, and in thy stead I reign,
The people will do honour to my place,
Or that the lords leal men will still remain,
If yet my father's sword be sharp in vain?
If on the wall his armour still hang up,
While for a spear I hold a drinking-cup?"

"O Son!" quoth Crœsus, "well I know thee brave,
And worthy of high deeds of chivalry;
Therefore the more thy dear life would I save,
Which now is threatened by the gods on high;
Three times one night I dreamed I saw thee die,
Slain by some deadly iron-pointed thing,
While weeping lords stood round thee in a ring."

Then loud laughed Atys, and he said again,
"Father, and did this ugly dream tell thee
What day it was on which I should be slain?
As may the gods grant I may one day be,
And not from sickness die right wretchedly,
Groaning with pain, my lords about my bed
Wishing to God that I were fairly dead;

"But slain in battle, as the Lydian kings
Have died ere now, in some great victory,
While all about the Lydian shouting rings
Death to the beaten foemen as they fly.
What death but this, O father! should I die?
But if my life by iron shall be done,
What steel to-day shall glitter in the sun?

"Yea, father, if to thee it seemeth good
To keep me from the bright steel-bearing throng,
Let me be brave at least within the wood;
For surely, if thy dream be true, no wrong
Can hap to me from this beast's tushes strong:
Unless perchance the beast is grown so wise,
He haunts the forest clad in Lydian guise."

Then Crœsus said: "O Son, I love thee so,
That thou shalt do thy will upon this tide:
But since unto this hunting thou must go,
A trusty friend along with thee shall ride,
Who not for anything shall leave thy side.
I think, indeed, he loves thee well enow
To thrust his heart 'twixt thee and any blow.

"Go then, O Son, and if by some short span
Thy life be measured, how shall it harm thee,
If while life last thou art a happy man?
And thou art happy; only unto me
Is trembling left, and infelicity:
The trembling of the man who loves on earth;
But unto thee is hope and present mirth.

"Nay, be thou not ashamed, for on this day
I fear not much: thou read'st my dream aright,
No teeth or claws shall take thy life away.
And it may chance, ere thy last glorious fight,
I shall be blinded by the endless night;
And brave Adrastus on this day shall be
Thy safeguard, and shall give good heart to me.

"Go then, and send him hither, and depart;
And as the heroes did, so mayst thou do,
Winning such fame as well may please thine heart."
With that word from the King did Atys go,
Who, left behind, sighed, saying, "May it be so,
Even as I hope; and yet I would to God
These men upon my threshold ne'er had trod."

So when Adrastus to the King was come
He said unto him, "O my Phrygian friend,
We in this land have given thee a home,
And 'gainst all foes your life will we defend:
Wherefore for us that life thou shouldest spend,
If any day there should be need therefor;
And now a trusty friend I need right sore.

"Doubtless ere now thou hast heard many say
There is a doom that threatens my son's life;
Therefore this place is stript of arms to-day,
And therefore still bides Atys with his wife,
And tempts not any god by raising strife;
Yet none the less by no desire of his,
To whom would war be most abundant bliss.

"And since to-day some glory he may gain
Against a monstrous bestial enemy
And that the meaning of my dream is plain;
That saith that he by steel alone shall die,
His burning wish I may not well deny,
Therefore afield to-morrow doth he wend
And herein mayst thou show thyself my friend—

"For thou as captain of his band shalt ride,
And keep a watchful eye of everything,
Nor leave him, whatsoever may betide:
Lo, thou art brave, the son of a great king,
And with thy praises doth this city ring,
Why should I tell thee what a name those gain,
Who dying for their friends, die not in vain?"

Then said Adrastus, "Now were I grown base
Beyond all words, if I should spare for aught
In guarding him; so sit with smiling face,
And of this matter take no further thought,
Because with my life shall his life be bought,
If ill should hap; and no ill fate it were,
If I should die for what I hold so dear."

Then went Adrastus, and next morn all things
That 'longed unto the hunting were well dight,
And forth they went clad as the sons of kings.
Fair was the morn, as through the sunshine bright
They rode, the Prince half wild with great delight,
The Phrygian smiling on him soberly,
And ever looking round with watchful eye.

So through the city all the rout rode fast,
With many a great black-muzzled yellow hound;
And then the teeming country-side they passed,
Until they came to sour and rugged ground,
And there rode up a little heathy mound,
That overlooked the scrubby woods and low,
That of the beast's lair somewhat they might know.

And there a good man of the country-side
Showed them the places where he mostly lay;
And they descending, through the wood did ride,
And followed on his tracks for half the day.
And at the last they brought him well to bay,
Within an oozy space amidst the wood,
About the which a ring of alders stood.

So when the hounds' changed voices clear they heard,
With hearts aflame on towards him straight they drew
Atys the first of all, of nought afeard,
Except that folk should say some other slew
The beast; and lustily his horn he blew,
Going afoot; then, mighty spear in hand,
Adrastus headed all the following band.

Now when they came unto the plot of ground
Where stood the boar, hounds dead about him lay
Or sprawled about, bleeding from many a wound,
But still the others held him well at bay,
Nor had he been bestead thus ere that day.
But yet, seeing Atys, straight he rushed at him,
Speckled with foam, bleeding in flank and limb.

Then Atys stood and cast his well-steeled spear
With a great shout, and straight and well it flew;
For now the broad blade cutting through the ear,
A stream of blood from out the shoulder drew.
And therewithal another, no less true,
Adrastus cast, whereby the boar had died:
But Atys drew the bright sword from his side,

And to the tottering beast he drew anigh:
But as the sun's rays ran adown the blade
Adrastus threw a javelin hastily,
For of the mighty beast was he afraid,
Lest by his wounds he should not yet be stayed,
But with a last rush cast his life away,
And dying there, the son of Crœsus slay.

But even as the feathered dart he hurled,
His strained, despairing eyes, beheld the end,
And changed seemed all the fashion of the world,
And past and future into one did blend,
As he beheld the fixed eyes of his friend,
That no reproach had in them, and no fear,
For Death had seized him ere he thought him near.

Adrastus shrieked, and running up he caught
The falling man, and from his bleeding side
Drew out the dart, and seeing that death had brought
Deliverance to him, he thereby had died;
But ere his hand the luckless steel could guide,
And he the refuge of poor souls could win,
The horror-stricken huntsmen had rushed in.

And these, with blows and cries he heeded nought,
His unresisting hands made haste to bind;
Then of the alder-boughs a bier they wrought,
And laid the corpse theron, and 'gan to wind
Homeward amidst the tangled wood and blind,
And going slowly, at the eventide,
Some leagues from Sardis did that day abide.

Onward next morn the slaughtered man they bore,
With him that slew him, and at end of day
They reached the city, and with mourning sore
Toward the King's palace did they take their way.
He in an open western chamber lay
Feasting, though inwardly his heart did burn
Until that Atys should to him return.

And when those wails first smote upon his ear
He set the wine-cup down, and to his feet
He rose, and bitter all-consuming fear
Swallowed his joy, and nigh he went to meet
That which was coming through the weeping street:
But in the end he thought it good to wait,
And stood there doubting all the ills of fate.

But when at last up to that royal place
Folk brought the thing he once had held so dear,
Still stood the King, staring with ghastly face
As they brought forth Adrastus and the bier,
But spoke at last, slowly without a tear,
"O Phrygian man, that I did purify,
Is it through thee that Atys came to die?"

"O King," Adrastus said, "take now my life,
With whatso torment seemeth good to thee,
As my word went, for I would end this strife,
And underneath the earth lie quietly;
Nor is it my will here alive to be:
For as my brother, so Prince Atys died,
And this unlucky hand some god did guide."

Then as a man constrained, the tale he told
From end to end, nor spared himself one whit:
And as he spoke, the wood did still behold,
The trodden grass, and Atys dead on it;
And many a change o'er the King's face did flit
Of kingly rage, and hatred and despair,
As on the slayer's face he still did stare.

At last he said, "Thy death avails me nought,
The gods themselves have done this bitter deed,
That I was all too happy was their thought,
Therefore thy heart is dead and mine doth bleed,
And I am helpless as a trodden weed:
Thou art but as the handle of the spear,
The caster sits far off from any fear.

"Yet, if thy hurt they meant, I can do this,—
—Loose him and let him go in peace from me—
I will not slay the slayer of all my bliss;
Yet go, poor man, for when thy face I see
I curse the gods for their felicity.
Surely some other slayer they would have found,
If thou hadst long ago been under ground.

"Alas, Adrastus! in my inmost heart
I knew the gods would one day do this thing
But deemed indeed that it would be thy part
To comfort me amidst my sorrowing;
Make haste to go, for I am still a King!
Madness may take me, I have many hands
Who will not spare to do my worst commands."

With that Adrastus' bonds were done away,
And forthwith to the city gates he ran,
And on the road where they had been that day
Rushed through the gathering night; and some lone man
Beheld next day his visage wild and wan,
Peering from out a thicket of the wood
Where he had spilt that well-beloved blood.

And now the day of burial pomp must be,
And to those rites all lords of Lydia came
About the King, and that day, they and he
Cast royal gifts of rich things on the flame;
But while they stood and wept, and called by name
Upon the dead, amidst them came a man
With raiment rent, and haggard face and wan:

Who when the marshals would have thrust him out
And men looked strange on him, began to say,
"Surely the world is changed since ye have doubt
Of who I am; nay, turn me not away,
For ye have called me princely ere to-day—
Adrastus, son of Gordius, a great king,
Where unto Pallas Phrygian maidens sing.

"O Lydians, many a rich thing have ye cast
Into this flame, but I myself will give
A greater gift, since now I see at last
The gods are wearied for that still I live,
And with their will, why should I longer strive?
Atys, O Atys, thus I give to thee
A life that lived for thy felicity."

And therewith from his side a knife he drew,
And, crying out, upon the pile he leapt,
And with one mighty stroke himself he slew.
So there these princes both together slept,
And their light ashes, gathered up, were kept
Within a golden vessel wrought all o'er
With histories of this hunting of the boar.

A GENTLE wind had risen midst his tale,
That bore the sweet scents of the fertile vale
In at the open windows; and these men
The burden of their years scarce noted then,
Soothed by the sweet luxurious summer time,
And by the cadence of that ancient rhyme,
Spite of its saddening import; nay, indeed,
Of some such thoughts the Wanderers had need
As that tale gave them—Yea, a man shall be
A wonder for his glorious chivalry,
First in all wisdom, of a prudent mind,
Yet none the less him too his fate shall find,
Unfenced by these, a man 'mongst other men.
Yea, and will Fortune pick out, now and then,
The noblest for the anvil of her blows;
Great names are few, and yet, indeed, who knows
What greater souls have fallen 'neath the stroke
Of careless fate? Purblind are most of folk,
The happy are the masters of the earth,
Which ever give small heed to hapless worth;
So goes the world, and this we needs must bear
Like eld and death: yet there were some men there
Who drank in silence to the memory
Of those who failed on earth great men to be,
Though better than the men who won the crown.
But when the sun was fairly going down
They left the house, and, following up the stream,
In the low sun saw the kingfisher gleam
'Twixt bank and alder, and the grebe steal out
From the high sedge, and, in his restless doubt,
Dive down, and rise to see what men were there;
They saw the swallow chase high up in air
The circling gnats; the shaded dusky pool
Broke by the splashing chub; the ripple cool,
Rising and falling, of some distant weir
They heard, till it oppressed the listening ear,
As twilight grew: so back they turned again
Glad of their rest, and pleasure after pain.

WITHIN the gardens once again they met,
That now the roses did well-nigh forget,
For hot July was drawing to an end,
And August came the fainting year to mend
With fruit and grain; so 'neath the trellises,
Nigh blossomless, did they lie well at ease,
And watched the poppies burn across the grass,
And o'er the bindweed's bells the brown bee pass
Still murmuring of his gains: windless and bright
The morn had been, to help their dear delight;
But heavy clouds ere noon grew round the sun,
And, halfway to the zenith, wild and dun
The sky grew, and the thunder growled afar;
But, ere the steely clouds began their war,
A change there came, and, as by some great hand,
The clouds that hung in threatening o'er the land
Were drawn away; then a light wind arose
That shook the light stems of that flowery close,
And made men sigh for pleasure; therewithal
Did mirth upon the feasting elders fall,
And they no longer watched the lowering sky,
But called aloud for some new history.
Then spoke the Suabian, "Sirs, this tale is told
Among our searchers for fine stones and gold,
And though I tell it wrong, be good to me;
For I the written book did never see,
Made by some Fleming, as I think, wherein
Is told this tale of wilfulness and sin."

THE WATCHING OF THE FALCON.

ARGUMENT.

The case of this falcon was such, that whoso watched it without sleeping for seven days and seven nights, had his first wish granted him by a fay lady, that appeared to him thereon; and some wished one thing, and some another. But a certain king, who watched the falcon daily, would wish for nought but the love of that fay; which wish being accomplished, was afterwards his ruin.

ACROSS the sea a land there is,
Where, if fate will, may men have bliss,
For it is fair as any land:
There hath the reaper a full hand,
While in the orchard hangs aloft
The purple fig, a-growing soft;
And fair the trellised vine-bunches
Are swung across the high elm-trees;
And in the rivers great fish play,
While over them pass day by day
The laden barges to their place.
There maids are straight, and fair of face,
And men are stout for husbandry,
And all is well as it can be
Upon this earth where all has end.
For on them God is pleased to send
The gift of Death down from above,
That envy, hatred, and hot love,
Knowledge with hunger by his side,
And avarice and deadly pride,
There may have end like everything,
Both to the shepherd and the king:
Lest this green earth become but hell
If folk for ever there should dwell.
Full little most men think of this,
But half in woe and half in bliss
They pass their lives, and die at last
Unwilling, though their lot be cast
In wretched places of the earth,
Where men have little joy from birth
Until they die; in no such case
Were those who tilled this pleasant place.
There soothly men were loth to die,
Though sometimes in his misery
A man would say "Would I were dead!"
Alas! full little likelihead
That he should live for ever there.
So folk within that country fair
Lived on, nor from their memories drave
The thought of what they could not have,
And without need tormented still
Each other with some bitter ill;
Yea, and themselves too, growing grey
With dread of some long-lingering day,
That never came ere they were dead
With green sods growing on the head;
Nowise content with what they had,
But falling still from good to bad
While hard they sought the hopeless best;
And seldom happy or at rest
Until at last with lessening blood
One foot within the grave they stood.

Now so it chanced that in this land
There did a certain castle stand,
Set all alone deep in the hills,
Amid the sound of falling rills
Within a valley of sweet grass,
To which there went one narrow pass
Through the dark hills, but seldom trod.
Rarely did horse-hoof press the sod
About the quiet weedy moat,
Where unscared did the great fish float;
Because men dreaded there to see
The uncouth things of faërie;
Nathless by some few fathers old
These tales about the place were told:
That neither squire nor seneschal
Or varlet came in bower or hall,
Yet all things were in order due,
Hangings of gold and red and blue,
And tables with fair service set;
Cups that had paid the Cæsar's debt
Could he have laid his hands on them;
Dorsars, with pearls in every hem,
And fair embroidered gold-wrought things,
Fit for a company of kings;
And in the chambers dainty beds,

With pillows dight for fair young heads;
And horses in the stables were,
And in the cellars wine full clear
And strong, and casks of ale and mead;
Yea, all things a great lord could need.
For whom these things were ready there
None knew; but if one chanced to fare
Into that place at Easter-tide,
There would he find a falcon tied
Unto a pillar of the Hall;
And such a fate to him would fall,
That if unto the seventh night,
He watched the bird from dark to light,
And light to dark unceasingly,
On the last evening he should see
A lady beautiful past words;
Then, were he come of clowns or lords,
Son of a swineherd or a king,
There must she grant him anything
Perforce, that he might dare to ask,
And do his very hardest task.
But if he slumbered, ne'er again
The wretch would wake; for he was slain
Helpless, by hands he could not see,
And torn and mangled wretchedly.

Now said these elders—Ere this tide
Full many folk this thing have tried,
But few have got much good thereby;
For first, a many came to die
By slumbering ere their watch was done;
Or else they saw that lovely one,
And mazed, they knew not what to say;
Or asked some toy for all their pay,
That easily they might have won,
Nor staked their lives and souls thereon;
Or asking, asked for some great thing
That was their bane; as to be king
One asked, and died the morrow morn
That he was crowned, of all forlorn.
Yet thither came a certain man,
Who from being poor great riches wan
Past telling, whose grandsons now are
Great lords thereby in peace and war.
And in their coat-of-arms they bear,
Upon a field of azure fair,
A castle and a falcon, set
Below a chief of golden fret.
And in our day a certain knight
Prayed to be worsted in no fight,
And so it happed to him: yet he
Died none the less most wretchedly,
And all his prowess was in vain,
For by a losel was he slain,
As on the highway side he slept
One summer night, of no man kept.

Such tales as these the fathers old
About that lonely castle told;
And in their day the King must try
Himself to prove that mystery,
Although, unless the fay could give
For ever on the earth to live,
Nought could he ask that he had not:
For boundless riches had he got,
Fair children, and a faithful wife;
And happily had passed his life,
And all fulfilled of victory,
Yet was he fain this thing to see.
So towards the mountains he set out
One noontide, with a gallant rout
Of knights and lords, and as the day
Began to fail, came to the way
Where he must enter all alone,
Between the dreary walls of stone.
Thereon to that fair company
He bade farewell, who wistfully
Looked backward oft as home they rode.
But in the entry he abode
Of that rough unknown narrowing pass,
Where twilight at the high noon was.
Then onward he began to ride:
Smooth rose the rocks on every side,
And seemed as they were cut by man;
Adown them ever water ran,
But they of living things were bare,
Yea, not a blade of grass grew there;
And underfoot rough was the way,
For scattered all about, there lay
Great jagged pieces of black stone.
Throughout the pass the wind did moan,
With such wild noises, that the King
Could almost think he heard something
Spoken of men; as one might hear
The voices of folk standing near
One's chamber wall: yet saw he nought
Except those high walls strangely wrought,
And overhead the strip of sky.
So, going onward painfully,
He met therein no evil thing,
But came about the sun-setting
Unto the opening of the pass,
And thence beheld a vale of grass
Bright with the yellow daffodil;
And all the vale the sun did fill
With his last glory. Midmost there
Rose up a stronghold, built four-square,
Upon a flowery grassy mound,
That moat and high wall ran around.
Thereby he saw a walled pleasance,
With walks and sward fit for the dance
Of Arthur's court in its best time,
That seemed to feel some magic clime;
For though through all the vale outside

Things were as in the April-tide,
And daffodils and cowslips grew
And hidden the March violets blew,
Within the bounds of that sweet close
Was trellised the bewildering rose;
There was the lily over-sweet,
And starry pinks for garlands meet;
And apricots hung on the wall
And midst the flowers did peaches fall,
And nought had blemish there or spot,
For in that place decay was not.

Silent awhile the King abode
Beholding all, then on he rode
And to the castle-gate drew nigh,
Till fell the drawbridge silently,
And when across it he did ride
He found the great gates open wide,
And entered there, but as he passed
The gates were shut behind him fast,
But not before that he could see
The drawbridge rise up silently.
Then round he gazed oppressed with awe,
And there no living thing he saw
Except the sparrows in the eaves,
As restless as light autumn leaves
Blown by the fitful rainy wind.
Thereon his final goal to find,
He lighted off his war-horse good
And let him wander as he would,
When he had eased him of his gear;
Then gathering heart against his fear.
Just at the silent end of day
Through the fair porch he took his way,
And found at last a goodly hall
With glorious hangings on the wall,
Inwrought with trees of every clime,
And stories of the ancient time,
But all of sorcery they were.
For o'er the daïs Venus fair,
Fluttered about by many a dove,
Made hopeless men for hopeless love,
Both sick and sorry; there they stood
Wrought wonderfully in various mood,
But wasted all by that hid fire
Of measureless o'er-sweet desire,
And let the hurrying world go by
Forgetting all felicity.
But down the hall the tale was wrought
How Argo in old time was brought
To Colchis for the fleece of gold.
And on the other side was told
How mariners for long years came
To Circe, winning grief and shame.
Until at last by hardihead
And craft, Ulysses won her bed.
Long upon these the King did look
And of them all good heed he took;
To see if they would tell him aught
About the matter that he sought,
But all were of the times long past;
So going all about, at last
When grown nigh weary of his search
A falcon on a silver perch,
Anigh the daïs did he see,
And wondered; because certainly
At his first coming 'twas not there;
But 'neath the bird a scroll most fair,
With golden letters on the white
He saw, and in the dim twilight
By diligence could he read this:—

"*Ye who have not enow of bliss,*
And in this hard world labour sore,
By manhood here may get you more,
And be fulfilled of everything,
Till ye be masters of the King.
And yet, since I who promise this
Am nowise God to give man bliss
Past ending, now in time beware,
And if you live in little care
Then turn aback and home again,
Lest unknown woe ye chance to gain
In wishing for a thing untried."

A little while did he abide,
When he had read this, deep in thought,
Wondering indeed if there were aught
He had not got, that a wise man
Would wish; yet in his mind it ran
That he might win a boundless realm,
Yea, come to wear upon his helm
The crown of the whole conquered earth;
That all who lived thereon, from birth
To death should call him King and Lord,
And great kings tremble at his word,
Until in turn he came to die.
Therewith a little did he sigh,
But thought, "Of Alexander yet
Men talk, nor would they e'er forget
My name, if this should come to be,
Whoever should come after me:
But while I lay wrapped round with gold
Should tales and histories manifold
Be written of me, false and true;
And as the time still onward drew
Almost a god would folk count me,
Saying, 'In our time none such be.'"
But therewith did he sigh again,
And said, "Ah, vain, and worse than vain!
For though the world forget me nought,
Yet by that time should I be brought
Where all the world I should forget,
And bitterly should I regret

That I, from godlike great renown,
To helpless death must fall adown:
How could I bear to leave it all?"
Then straight upon his mind did fall
Thoughts of old longings half forgot,
Matters for which his heart was hot
A while ago: whereof no more
He cared for some, and some right sore
Had vexed him, being fulfilled at last.
And when the thought of these had passed
Still something was there left behind,
That by no torturing of his mind
Could he in any language name,
Or into form of wishing frame.

At last he thought, "What matters it,
Before these seven days shall flit
Some great thing surely shall I find,
That gained will not leave grief behind,
Nor turn to deadly injury.
So now will I let these things be
And think of some unknown delight."

Now, therewithal, was come the night
And thus his watch was well begun;
And till the rising of the sun,
Waking, he paced about the hall,
And saw the hangings on the wall
Fade into nought, and then grow white
In patches by the pale moonlight,
And then again fade utterly
As still the moonbeams passed them by;
Then in a while, with hope of day,
Begin a little to grow grey,
Until familiar things they grew,
As up at last the great sun drew,
And lit them with his yellow light
At ending of another night.
Then right glad was he of the day,
That passed with him in such-like way;
For neither man nor beast came near,
Nor any voices did he hear.
And when again it drew to night
Silent it passed, till first twilight
Of morning came, and then he heard
The feeble twittering of some bird,
That, in that utter silence drear,
Smote harsh and startling on his ear.
Therewith came on that lonely day
That passed him in no other way;
And thus six days and nights went by
And nothing strange had come anigh.
And on that day he well-nigh deemed
That all that story had been dreamed.
Daylight and dark, and night and day,
Passed ever in their wonted way;
The wind played in the trees outside,
The rooks from out the high trees cried;
And all seemed natural, frank, and fair,
With little signs of magic there.
Yet neither could he quite forget
That close with summer blossoms set,
And fruit hung on trees blossoming,
When all about was early spring.
Yea, if all this by man were made,
Strange was it that yet undecayed
The food lay on the tables still
Unchanged by man; that wine did fill
The golden cups, yet bright and red.
And all was so apparelléd
For guests that came not, yet was all
As though that servants filled the hall.
So waxed and waned his hopes, and still
He formed no wish for good or ill.
And while he thought of this and that
Upon his perch the falcon sat
Unfed, unhooded, his bright eyes
Beholders of the hard-earned prize,
Glancing around him restlessly,
As though he knew the time drew nigh
When this long watching should be done.

So little by little fell the sun,
From high noon unto sun-setting;
And in that lapse of time the King,
Though still he woke, yet none the less
Was dreaming in his sleeplessness
Of this and that which he had done
Before this watch he had begun;
Till, with a start, he looked at last
About him, and all dreams were past;
For now, though it was past twilight
Without, within all grew as bright
As when the noon-sun smote the wall,
Though no lamp shone within the hall.
Then rose the King upon his feet,
And well-nigh heard his own heart beat,
And grew all pale for hope and fear,
As sound of footsteps caught his ear
But soft, and as some fair lady,
Going as gently as might be,
Stopped now and then awhile, distraught
By pleasant wanderings of sweet thought.
Nigher the sound came, and more nigh,
Until the King unwittingly
Trembled, and felt his hair arise,
But on the door still kept his eyes.
That opened soon, and in the light
There stepped alone a lady bright,
And made straight toward him up the hall.
In golden garments was she clad
And round her waist a belt she had
Of emeralds fair, and from her feet,
That shod with gold the floor did meet,

She held the raiment daintily,
And on her golden head had she
A rose-wreath round a pearl-wrought crown.
Softly she walked with eyes cast down,
Nor looked she any other than
An earthly lady, though no man
Has seen so fair a thing as she.
So when her face the King could see
Still more he trembled, and he thought,
"Surely my wish is hither brought,
And this will be a goodly day
If for mine own I win this may."
And therewithal she drew anear
Until the trembling King could hear
Her very breathing, and she raised
Her head and on the King's face gazed
With serious eyes, and stopping there,
Swept from her shoulders her long hair,
And let her gown fall on her feet,
Then spoke in a clear voice and sweet:
"Well hast thou watched; so now, O King,
Be bold, and wish for some good thing;
And yet, I counsel thee, be wise.
Behold, spite of these lips and eyes,
Hundreds of years old now am I
And have seen joy and misery.
And thou, who yet hast lived in bliss,
I bid thee well consider this;
Better it were that men should live
As beasts, and take what earth can give,
The air, the warm sun and the grass
Until unto the earth they pass,
And gain perchance nought worse than rest,
Than that not knowing what is best
For sons of men, they needs must thirst
For what shall make their lives accurst.
"Therefore I bid thee now beware,
Lest getting something seeming fair
Thou com'st in vain to long for more,
Or lest the thing thou wishest for
Make thee unhappy till thou diest,
Or lest with speedy death thou buyest
A little hour of happiness
Or lazy joy with sharp distress.
"Alas, why say I this to thee?
For now I see full certainly
That thou wilt ask for such a thing;
It had been best for thee to fling
Thy body from a mountain-top,
Or in a white hot fire to drop,
Or ever thou hadst seen me here.
Nay then be speedy and speak clear."
Then the King cried out eagerly,
Grown fearless, "Ah, be kind to me!
Thou knowest what I long for then!
Thou know'st that I, a king of men,
Will ask for nothing else than thee!
Thou didst not say this could not be,
And I have had enough of bliss,
If I may end my life with this."
"Hearken," she said, "what men will say
When they are mad! before to-day
I knew that words such things could mean,
And wondered that it could have been.
"Think well, because this wished-for joy,
That surely will thy bliss destroy,
Will let thee live, until thy life
Is wrapped in such bewildering strife
That all thy days will seem but ill—
Now wilt thou wish for this thing still?"
"Wilt thou then grant it?" cried the King;
"Surely thou art an earthly thing,
And all this is but mockery,
And thou canst tell no more than I
What ending to my life shall be."
"Nay, then," she said, "I grant it thee
Perforce; come nigh, for I am thine
Until the morning sun doth shine,
And only coming time can prove
What thing I am."
Dizzy with love,
And with surprise struck motionless
That this divine thing, with far less
Of striving than a village maid,
Had yielded, there he stood afraid,
Spite of hot words and passionate,
And strove to think upon his fate.

But as he stood there, presently
With smiling face she drew anigh,
And on his face he felt her breath.
"O love," she said, "dost thou fear death?
Not till next morning shalt thou die,
Or fall into thy misery,"
Then on his hand her hand did fall,
And forth she led him down the hall,
Going full softly by his side.
"O love," she said, "now well betide
The day whereon thou cam'st to me.
I would this night a year might be,
Yea, life-long; such life as we have,
A thousand years from womb to grave."

And then that clinging hand seemed worth
Whatever joy was left on earth,
And every trouble he forgot,
And time and death remembered not:
Kinder she grew, she clung to him
With loving arms; her eyes did swim
With love and pity, as he strove
To show the wisdom of his love;
With trembling lips she praised his choice,
And said, "Ah, well may'st thou rejoice,
Well may'st thou think this one short night

Worth years of other men's delight,
If thy heart as mine own heart is,
Sunk in a boundless sea of bliss;
O love, rejoice with me! rejoice!"
But as she spoke, her honied voice
Trembled, and midst of sobs she said,
"O love, and art thou still afraid?
Return, then, to thine happiness,
Nor will I love thee any less;
But watch thee as a mother might
Her child at play."
With strange delight
He stammered out, "Nay, keep thy tears
For me, and for my ruined years
Weep love, that I may love thee more,
My little hour will soon be o'er."
"Ah, love," she said, "and thou art wise
As men are, with long miseries
Buying these idle words and vain;
My foolish love, with lasting pain.
And yet, thou wouldst have died at last
If in all wisdom thou hadst passed
Thy weary life: forgive me then,
In pitying the sad life of men."
Then in such bliss his soul did swim,
But tender music unto him
Her words were; death and misery
But empty names were grown to be,
As from that place his steps she drew,
And dark the hall behind them grew.

BUT end comes to all earthly bliss,
And by his choice full short was his;
And in the morning, grey and cold,
Beside the daïs did she hold
His trembling hand, and wistfully
He, doubting what his fate should be,
Gazed at her solemn eyes, that now,
Beneath her calm, untroubled brow,
Were fixed on his wild face and wan;
At last she said, "Oh, hapless man,
Depart! your full wish you have had;
A little time you have been glad,
You shall be sorry till you die.
"And though, indeed, full fain am I
This might not be; nathless, as day
Night follows, colourless and grey,
So this shall follow your delight,
Your joy hath ending with last night—
Nay, peace! and hearken to your fate.
"Strife without peace, early and late,
Lasting long after you are dead,
And laid with earth upon your head;
War without victory shall you have
Defeat; nor honour shall you save;
Your fair land shall be rent and torn,
Your people be of all forlorn,
And all men curse you for this thing."
She loosed his hand, but yet the King
Said, "Yea, and I may go with thee?
Why should we part? then let things be
E'en as they will!" "Poor man," she said,
"Thou ravest; our hot love is dead,
If ever it had any life:
Go, make thee ready for the strife
Wherein thy days shall soon be wrapped;
And of the things that here have happed
Make thou such joy as thou may'st do;
But I from this place needs must go,
Nor shalt thou ever see me more
Until thy troubled life is o'er:
Alas! to say 'farewell' to thee
Were nought but bitter mockery.
Fare as thou may'st, and with good heart
Play to the end thy wretched part."

Therewith she turned and went from him,
And with such pain his eyes did swim
He scarce could see her leave the place;
And then, with troubled and pale face,
He gat him thence: and soon he found
His good horse in the base-court bound;
So, loosing him, forth did he ride,
For the great gates were open wide,
And flat the heavy drawbridge lay.

So by the middle of the day,
That murky pass had he gone through,
And come to country that he knew;
And homeward turned his horse's head,
And passing village and homestead
Nigh to his palace came at last;
And still the further that he passed
From that strange castle of the fays,
More dreamlike seemed those seven days,
And dreamlike the delicious night;
And like a dream the shoulders white,
And clinging arms and yellow hair,
And dreamlike the sad morning there.
Until at last he 'gan to deem
That all might well have been a dream—
Yet why was life a weariness?
What meant this sting of sharp distress?
This longing for a hopeless love,
No sighing from his heart could move?

Or else, "She did not come and go
As fays might do, but soft and slow
Her lovely feet fell on the floor;
She set her fair hand to the door
As any dainty maid might do;
And though, indeed, there are but few

Beneath the sun as fair as she,
She seemed a fleshly thing to be.
Perchance a merry mock this is,
And I may some day have the bliss
To see her lovely face again,
As smiling she makes all things plain.
And then as I am still a king,
With me may she make tarrying
Full long, yea, till I come to die."
Therewith at last being come anigh
Unto his very palace gate,
He saw his knights and squires wait
His coming, therefore on the ground
He lighted, and they flocked around
Till he should tell them of his fare.
Then mocking said he, "Ye may dare,
The worst man of you all, to go
And watch as I was bold to do;
For nought I heard except the wind,
And nought I saw to call to mind."
So said he, but they noted well
That something more he had to tell
If it had pleased him; one old man,
Beholding his changed face and wan,
Muttered, "Would God it might be so!
Alas! I fear what fate may do;
Too much good fortune hast thou had
By anything to be more glad
Than thou hast been, I fear thee then
Lest thou becom'st a curse to men."
But to his place the doomed King passed,
And all remembrance strove to cast
From out his mind of that past day,
And spent his life in sport and play.

GREAT among other kings, I said
He was, before he first was led
Unto that castle of the fays,
Buf soon he lost his happy days
And all his goodly life was done.
And first indeed his best-loved son,
The very apple of his eye,
Waged war against him bitterly;
And when this son was overcome
And taken, and folk led him home,
And him the King had gone to meet,
Meaning with gentle words and sweet
To win him to his love again,
By his own hand he found him slain.
I know not if the doomed King yet
Remembered the fay lady's threat.
But troubles upon troubles came:
His daughter next was brought to shame,
Who unto all eyes seemed to be
The image of all purity,
And fleeing from the royal place
The King no more beheld her face.
Then next a folk that came from far
Sent to the King great threats of war,
But he, full-fed of victory,
Deemed this a little thing to be,
And thought the troubles of his home
Thereby he well might overcome
Amid the hurry of the fight.
His foemen seemed of little might,
Although they thronged like summer bees
About the outlying villages,
And on the land great ruin brought.
Well, he this barbarous people sought
With such an army as seemed meet
To put the world beneath his feet;
The day of battle came, and he,
Flushed with the hope of victory,
Grew happy, as he had not been
Since he those glorious eyes had seen.
They met,—his solid ranks of steel
There scarcely more the darts could feel
Of those new foemen, than if they
Had been a hundred miles away:—
They met,—a storied folk were his
To whom sharp war had long been bliss,
A thousand years of memories
Were flashing in their shielded eyes;
And grave philosophers they had
To bid them ever to be glad
To meet their death and get life done
Midst glorious deeds from sire to son.
And those they met were beasts, or worse,
To whom life seemed a jest, a curse;
Of fame and name they had not heard;
Honour to them was but a word,
A word spoke in another tongue;
No memories round their banners clung,
No walls they knew, no art of war
By hunger were they driven afar
Unto the place whereon they stood,
Ravening for bestial joys and blood.

No wonder if these barbarous men
Were slain by hundreds to each ten
Of the King's brave well-armoured folk,
No wonder if their charges broke
To nothing on the walls of steel,
And back the baffled hordes must reel.
So stood throughout a summer day,
Scarce touched, the King's most fair array,
Yet as it drew to even-tide
The foe still surged on every side,
As hopeless hunger-bitten men,
About his folk grown wearied then.
Therewith the King beheld that crowd
Howling and dusk, and cried aloud,

"What do ye, warriors? and how long
Shall weak folk hold in check the strong?
Nay, forward banners! end the day
And show these folk how brave men play."
The young knights shouted at his word,
But the old folk in terror heard
The shouting run adown the line,
And saw men flush as if with wine—
"O Sire," they said, "the day is sure,
Nor will these folk the night endure
Beset with misery and fears."
Alas! they spoke to heedless ears;
For scarce one look on them he cast
But forward through the ranks he passed,
And cried out, "Who will follow me
To win a fruitful victory?"
And toward the foe in haste he spurred,
And at his back their shouts he heard,
Such shouts as he ne'er heard again.

They met—ere moonrise all the plain
Was filled by men in hurrying flight,
The relics of that shameful fight;
The close array, the full-armed men,
The ancient fame availed not then,
The dark night only was a friend
To bring that slaughter to an end;
And surely there the King had died,
But driven by that back-rushing tide
Against his will he needs must flee;
And as he pondered bitterly
On all that wreck that he had wrought,
From time to time indeed he thought
Of the fay woman's dreadful threat.

"But everything is not lost yet,"
Next day he said; great was the rout
And shameful beyond any doubt,
But since indeed at eventide
The flight began, not many died,
And gathering all the stragglers now
His troops still made a gallant show—
Alas! it was a show indeed;
Himself desponding, did he lead
His beaten men against the foe,
Thinking at least to lie alow
Before the final rout should be;
But scarce upon the enemy
Could these, whose shaken banners shook
The frightened world, now dare to look;
Nor yet could the doomed King die there
A death he once had held most fair;
Amid unwounded men he came
Back to his city, bent with shame,
Unkingly, midst his great distress,
Yea, weeping at the bitterness
Of women's curses that did greet
His passage down the troubled street.
But sight of all the things they loved,
The memory of their manhood moved
Within the troops, and aged men
And boys must think of battle then.
And men that had not seen the foe
Must clamour to the war to go.
So a great army poured once more
From out the city, and before
The very gates they fought again;
But their late valour was in vain;
They died indeed, and that was good,
But nought they gained for all the blood
Poured out like water; for the foe,
Men might have stayed a while ago,
A match for very gods were grown.
So like the field in June-tide mown
The King's men fell, and but in vain
The remnant strove the town to gain;
Whose battlements were nought to stay
An untaught foe upon that day,
Though many a tale the annals told
Of sieges in the days of old,
When all the world then knew of war
From that fair place was driven afar.

As for the King, a charmed life
He seemed to bear; from out that strife
He came unhurt, and he could see,
As down the valley he did flee
With his most wretched company,
His palace flaming to the sky.
Then in the very midst of woe
His yearning thoughts would backward go
Unto the castle of the fay;
He muttered, "Shall I curse that day,
The last delight that I have had,
For certainly I then was glad?
And who knows if what men call bliss
Had been much better now than this
When I am hastening to the end."
That fearful rest, that dreaded friend,
That Death, he did not gain as yet;
A band of men he soon did get,
A ruined rout of bad and good,
With whom within the tangled wood,
The rugged mountain, he abode,
And thenceforth oftentimes they rode
Into the fair land once called his,
And yet but little came of this,
Except more woe for Heaven to see,
Some little added misery
Unto that miserable realm:
The barbarous foe did overwhelm
The cities and the fertile plain,
And many a peaceful man was slain,
And many a maiden brought to shame,

And yielded towns were set aflame;
For all the land was masterless.
  Long dwelt the King in great distress,
From wood to mountain ever tost,
Mourning for all that he had lost.
Until it chanced upon a day,
Asleep in early morn he lay,
And in a vision there did see,
Clad all in black, that fay lady
Whereby all this had come to pass,
But dim as in a misty glass.
She said, "I come thy death to tell,
Yet now to thee may say 'farewell,'
For in a short space wilt thou be
Within an endless dim country
Where thou may'st well win woe or bliss."
Therewith she stooped his lips to kiss
And vanished straightway from his sight,
So waking there he sat upright
And looked around, but nought could see
And heard but song-birds' melody,
For that was the first break of day.

  Then with a sigh adown he lay
And slept, nor ever woke again,
For in that hour was he slain
By stealthy traitors as he slept.
  He of a few was much bewept,
But of most men was well forgot,
While the town's ashes still were hot
The foeman on that day did burn.
  As for the land, great Time did turn
The bloody fields to deep green grass,
And from the minds of men did pass
The memory of that time of woe,
And at this day all things are so
As first I said; a land it is
Where men may dwell in rest and bliss
If so they will—Who yet will not,
Because their hasty hearts are hot
With foolish hate, and longing vain
The sire and dam of grief and pain.

NEATH the bright sky cool grew the weary earth,
And many a bud in that fair hour had birth
Upon the garden bushes; in the west
The sky got ready for the great sun's rest,
And all was fresh and lovely; none the less
Although those old men shared the happiness
Of the bright eve, 'twas mixed with memories
Of how they might in old times have been wise,
Not casting by for very wilfulness
What wealth might come their changing life to bless;
Lulling their hearts to sleep, amid the cold
Of bitter times, that so they might behold
Some joy at last, e'en if it lingered long.
That, wearing not their souls with grief and wrong,
They still might watch the changing world go by,
Content to live, content at last to die.
  Alas! if they had reached content at last,
It was perforce when all their strength was past;
And after loss of many days once bright,
With foolish hopes of unattained delight.

AUGUST.

ACROSS the gap made by our English hinds,
Amidst the Roman's handiwork, behold
Far off the long-roofed church; the shepherd binds
The withy round the hurdles of his fold,
Down in the foss the river fed of old,
That through long lapse of time has grown to be
The little grassy valley that you see.

Rest here awhile, not yet the eve is still,
The bees are wandering yet, and you may hear
The barley mowers on the trenchéd hill,
The sheep-bells, and the restless changing weir,
All little sounds made musical and clear
Beneath the sky that burning August gives,
While yet the thought of glorious Summer lives.

Ah, love! such happy days, such days as these,
Must we still waste them, craving for the best,
Like lovers o'er the painted images
Of those who once their yearning hearts have blessed?
Have we been happy on our day of rest?
Thine eyes say "yes,"—but if it came again,
Perchance its ending would not seem so vain.

Now came fulfilment of the year's desire,
The tall wheat, coloured by the August fire
Grew heavy-headed, dreading its decay,
And blacker grew the elm-trees day by day.
About the edges of the yellow corn,
And o'er the gardens grown somewhat outworn
The bees went hurrying to fill up their store;
The apple-boughs bent over more and more;
With peach and apricot the garden wall
Was odorous, and the pears began to fall
From off the high tree with each freshening breeze.

So in a house bordered about with trees,
A little raised above the waving gold
The Wanderers heard this marvellous story told,
While 'twixt the gleaming flasks of ancient wine,
They watched the reapers' slow advancing line.

PYGMALION AND THE IMAGE.

ARGUMENT.

A man of Cyprus, a sculptor named Pygmalion, made an image of a woman, fairer than any that had yet been seen, and in the end came to love his own handiwork as though it had been alive: wherefore, praying to Venus for help, he obtained his end, for she made the image alive indeed, and a woman, and Pygmalion wedded her.

AT Amathus, that from the southern side
Of Cyprus, looks across the Syrian sea,
There did in ancient time a man abide
Known to the island-dwellers, for that he
Had wrought most godlike works in imagery,
And day by day still greater honour won,
Which man our old books call Pygmalion.

Yet in the praise of men small joy he had,
But walked abroad with downcast brooding face.
Nor yet by any damsel was made glad;
For, sooth to say, the women of that place
Must seem to all men an accursed race,
Who with the Turner of all Hearts once strove;
And now their hearts must carry lust for love.

Upon a day it chanced that he had been
About the streets, and on the crowded quays,
Rich with unopened wealth of bales, had seen
The dark-eyed merchants of the southern seas
In chaffer with the base Propœtides,
And heavy-hearted gat him home again,
His once-loved life grown idle, poor, and vain.

And there upon his images he cast
His weary eyes, yet little noted them,
As still from name to name his swift thought passed.
For what to him was Juno's well-wrought hem,
Diana's shaft, or Pallas' olive-stem?
What help could Hermes' rod unto him give,
Until with shadowy things he came to live?

Yet note, that though, while looking on the sun,
The craftsman o'er his work some morn of spring
May chide his useless labour never done,
For all his murmurs, with no other thing
He soothes his heart, and dulls thought's poisonous sting,
And thus in thought's despite the world goes on;
And so it was with this Pygmalion.

Unto the chisel must he set his hand,
And slowly, still in troubled thought must pace,
About a work begun, that there doth stand,
And still returning to the self-same place,
Unto the image now must set his face,
And with a sigh his wonted toil begin,
Half-loathed, half-loved, a little rest to win.

The lessening marble that he worked upon,
A woman's form now imaged doubtfully,
And in such guise the work had he begun,
Because when he the untouched block did see
In wandering veins that form there seemed to be,
Whereon he cried out in a careless mood,
"O lady Venus, make this presage good!

"And then this block of stone shall be thy maid,
And, not without rich golden ornament,
Shall bide within thy quivering myrtle-shade."
So spoke he, but the goddess, well content,
Unto his hand such godlike mastery sent,
That like the first artificer he wrought,
Who made the gift that woe to all men brought.

And yet, but such as he was wont to do,
At first indeed that work divine he deemed,
And as the white chips from the chisel flew
Of other matters languidly he dreamed,
For easy to his hand that labour seemed,
And he was stirred with many a troubling thought,
And many a doubt perplexed him as he wrought.

And yet, again, at last there came a day
When smoother and more shapely grew the stone,
And he, grown eager, put all thought away
But that which touched his craftsmanship alone,

And he would gaze at what his hands had done,
Until his heart with boundless joy would swell
That all was wrought so wonderfully well.

Yet long it was ere he was satisfied,
And with the pride that by his mastery
This thing was done, whose equal far and wide
In no town of the world a man could see,
Came burning longing that the work should be
E'en better still, and to his heart there came
A strange and strong desire he could not name.

The night seemed long, and long the twilight seemed,
A vain thing seemed his flowery garden fair;
Though through the night still of his work he dreamed,
And though his smooth-stemmed trees so nigh it were,
That thence he could behold the marble hair;
Nought was enough, until with steel in hand
He came before the wondrous stone to stand.

No song could charm him, and no histories
Of men's misdoings could avail him now,
Nay, scarcely seaward had he turned his eyes,
If men had said, "The fierce Tyrrhenians row
Up through the bay; rise up and strike a blow
For life and goods;" for nought to him seemed dear
But to his well-loved work to be anear.

Then vexed he grew, and knowing not his heart,
Unto himself he said, "Ah, what is this,
That I who oft was happy to depart,
And wander where the boughs each other kiss
'Neath the west wind, now have no other bliss
But in vain smoothing of this marble maid,
Whose chips this month a drachma had outweighed?

"Lo I will get me to the woods and try
If I my woodcraft have forgotten quite,
And then, returning, lay this folly by,
And eat my fill, and sleep my sleep anight,
And 'gin to carve a Hercules aright
Upon the morrow; and perchance indeed
The Theban will be good to me at need."

With that he took his quiver and his bow,
And through the gates of Amathus he went,
And toward the mountain slopes began to go,
Within the woods to work out his intent.
Fair was the day, the honied beanfield's scent
The west wind bore unto him; o'er the way
The glittering noisy poplar leaves did play.

All things were moving; as his hurried feet
Passed by, within the flowery swathe he heard
The sweeping of the scythe, the swallow fleet
Rose over him, the sitting partridge stirred
On the field's edge; the brown bee by him whirred,
Or murmured in the clover flowers below.
But he with bowed-down head failed not to go.

At last he stopped, and, looking round, he said,
"Like one whose thirtieth year is well gone by,
The day is getting ready to be dead;
No rest, and on the border of the sky
Already the great banks of dark haze lie;
No rest—what do I midst this stir and noise?
What part have I in these unthinking joys?"

With that he turned, and toward the city-gate
Through the sweet fields went swifter than he came,
And cast his heart into the hands of fate;
Nor strove with it, when higher 'gan to flame
That strange and strong desire without a name;
Till panting, thinking of nought else, once more
His hand was on the latch of his own door.

One moment there he lingered, as he said,
"Alas! what should I do if she were gone?"
But even with that word his brow waxed red
To hear his own lips name a thing of stone,
As though the gods some marvel there had done,
And made his work alive; and therewithal
In turn great pallor on his face did fall.

But with a sigh he passed into the house,
Yet even then his chamber-door must hold,
And listen there, half blind and timorous,
Until his heart should wax a little bold;
Then entering, motionless and white and cold,
He saw the image stand amidst the floor
All whitened now by labour done before.

Blinded with tears, his chisel up he caught,
And, drawing near, and sighing, tenderly
Upon the marvel of the face he wrought,
E'en as he used to pass the long days by;
But his sighs changed to sobbing presently,
And on the floor the useless steel he flung,
And, weeping loud, about the image clung.

"Alas!" he cried, "why have I made thee then,
That thus thou mockest me? I know indeed
That many such as thou are loved of men,
Whose passionate eyes poor wretches still will lead
Into their net, and smile to see them bleed;
But these the gods made, and this hand made thee
Who wilt not speak one little word to me."

Then from the image did he draw aback
To gaze on it through tears: and you had said,
Regarding it, that little did it lack
To be a living and most lovely maid;
Naked it was, its unbound locks were laid
Over the lovely shoulders; with one hand
Reached out, as to a lover, did it stand,

The other held a fair rose over-blown;
No smile was on the parted lips, the eyes
Seemed as if even now great love had shown
Unto them, something of its sweet surprise,
Yet saddened them with half-seen mysteries,
And still midst passion maiden-like she seemed;
As though of love unchanged for aye, she dreamed.

Reproachfully beholding all her grace,
Pygmalion stood, until he grew dry-eyed,
And then at last he turned away his face
As if from her cold eyes his grief to hide;
And thus a weary while did he abide,
With nothing in his heart but vain desire,
The ever-burning, unconsuming fire.

But when again he turned his visage round
His eyes were brighter and no more he wept,
As if some little solace he had found,
Although his folly none the more had slept,
Rather some new-born god-sent madness kept
His other madness from destroying him,
And made the hope of death wax faint and dim;

For, trembling and ashamed, from out the street
Strong men he called, and faint with jealousy
He caused them bear the ponderous, moveless feet
Unto the chamber where he used to lie,
So in a fair niche to his bed anigh,
Unwitting of his woe, they set it down,
Then went their ways beneath his troubled frown.

Then to his treasury he went, and sought
Fair gems for its adornment, but all there
Seemed to his eager eyes but poor and nought,
Not worthy e'en to touch her rippled hair,
So he, departing, through the streets 'gan fare,
And from the merchants at a mighty cost
Bought gems that kings for no good deed had lost.

These then he hung her senseless neck around,
Set on her fingers, and fair arms of stone,
Then cast himself before her on the ground,
Praying for grace for all that he had done
In leaving her untended and alone;
And still with every hour his madness grew
Though all his folly in his heart he knew.

At last asleep before her feet he lay,
Worn out with passion, yet this burning pain
Returned on him, when with the light of day
He woke and wept before her feet again;
Then of the fresh and new-born morning fain,
Into his garden passed, and therefrom bore
New spoil of flowers his love to lay before.

A little altar, with fine gold o'erlaid,
Was in his house, that he a while ago
At some great man's command had deftly made,
And this he now must take and set below
Her well-wrought feet, and there must red flame glow
About sweet wood, and he must send her thence
The odour of Arabian frankincense.

Then as the smoke went up, he prayed and said,
"Thou, image, hear'st me not, nor wilt thou speak,
But I perchance shall know when I am dead,
If this has been some goddess' sport, to seek
A wretch, and in his heart infirm and weak
To set her glorious image, so that he,
Loving the form of immortality,

"May make much laughter for the gods above:
Hear me, and if my love misliketh thee
Then take my life away, for I will love
Till death unfeared at last shall come to me,
And give me rest, if he of might may be
To slay the love of that which cannot die,
The heavenly beauty that can ne'er pass by."

No word indeed the moveless image said,
But with the sweet grave eyes his hands had wrought
Still gazed down on his bowed imploring head,
Yet his own words some solace to him brought,
Gilding the net wherein his soul was caught
With something like to hope, and all that day
Some tender words he ever found to say;

And still he felt as something heard him speak;
Sometimes he praised her beauty, and sometimes
Reproached her in a feeble voice and weak,
And at the last drew forth a book of rhymes,
Wherein were writ the tales of many climes,
And read aloud the sweetness hid therein
Of lovers' sorrows and their tangled sin.

And when the sun went down, the frankincense
Again upon the altar-flame he cast,
That through the open window floating thence,
O'er the fresh odours of the garden passed;
And so another day was gone at last,
And he no more his love-lorn watch could keep,
But now for utter weariness must sleep.

But in the night he dreamed that she was gone,
And knowing that he dreamed, tried hard to wake
And could not, but forsaken and alone
He seemed to weep as though his heart would break,
And when the night her sleepy veil did take
From off the world, waking, his tears he found
Still wet upon the pillow all around.

Then at the first, bewildered by those tears,
He fell a-wondering wherefore he had wept,
But suddenly remembering all his fears,
Panting with terror, from the bed he leapt,
But still its wonted place the image kept,
Nor moved for all the joyful ecstasy
Wherewith he blessed the day that showed it nigh.

Then came the morning offering and the day,
Midst flowers and words of love and kisses sweet
From morn, through noon, to evening passed away,
And scarce unhappy, crouching at her feet
He saw the sun descend the sea to meet;
And scarce unhappy through the darkness crept
Unto his bed, and midst soft dreaming slept.

But the next morn, e'en while the incense-smoke
At sun-rising curled round about her head,
Sweet sound of songs the wonted quiet broke
Down in the street, and he by something led,
He knew not what, must leave his prayer unsaid,
And through the freshness of the morn must see
The folk who went with that sweet minstrelsy;

Damsels and youths in wonderful attire,
And in their midst upon a car of gold
An image of the Mother of Desire,
Wrought by his hands in days that seemed grown old
Though those sweet limbs a garment did enfold,
Coloured like flame, enwrought with precious things,
Most fit to be the prize of striving kings.

Then he remembered that the manner was
That fair-clad priests the lovely Queen should take
Thrice in the year, and through the city pass,
And with sweet songs the dreaming folk awake;
And through the clouds a light there seemed to break
When he remembered all the tales well told
About her glorious kindly deeds of old.

So his unfinished prayer he finished not,
But, kneeling, once more kissed the marble feet,
And, while his heart with many thoughts waxed hot,
He clad himself with fresh attire and meet
For that bright service, and with blossoms sweet
Entwined with tender leaves, he crowned his head,
And followed after as the goddess led.

But long and vain unto him seemed the way
Until they came unto her house again;
Long years, the while they went about to lay
The honey-hiding dwellers on the plain,
The sweet companions of the yellowing grain
Upon her golden altar; long and long
Before, at end of their delicious song,

They stripped her of her weed with reverend hands,
And showed the ivory limbs his hand had wrought;
Yea, and too long e'en then ere those fair bands,
Dispersing here and there, the shadow sought
Of Indian spice-trees o'er the warm sea brought
And, toward the splashing of the fountain turned,
Mocked the noon sun that o'er the cloisters burned.

But when the crowd of worshippers was gone,
And through the golden dimness of the place
The goddess' very servants paced alone,
Or some lone damsel murmured of her case
Apart from prying eyes, he turned his face
Unto that image made with toil and care,
In days when unto him it seemed most fair.

Dusky and dim, though rich with gems and gold,
The house of Venus was; high in the dome
The burning sun-light you could now behold,
From nowhere else the light of day might come,
To shame the Shame-faced Mother's lovely home;
A long way off the shrine, the fresh sea-breeze,
Now just arising, brushed the myrtle-trees.

The torches of the flower-crowned, singing band
Erewhile, indeed, made more than daylight there,
Lighting the painted tales of many a land,
And carven heroes, with their unused glare;
But now a few soft, glimmering lamps there were,
And on the altar a thin, flickering flame
Just showed the golden letters of her name.

Blue in the dome yet hung the incense-cloud,
And still its perfume lingered all around;
And, trodden by the light-foot, fervent crowd,
Thick lay the summer flowers upon the ground,
And now from far-off halls uprose the sound
Of Lydian music, and the dancer's cry,
As though some door were opened suddenly.

So there he stood, some help from her to gain,
Bewildered by that twilight midst of day;
Downcast with listening to the joyous strain
He had no part in, hopeless with delay
Of all the fair things he had meant to say;
Yet, as the incense on the flame he cast,
From stammering lips and pale these words there passed—

"O thou forgotten help, dost thou yet know
What thing it is I need, when even I,
Bent down before thee in this shame and woe,
Can frame no set of words to tell thee why
I needs must pray, O help me or I die!
Or slay me, and in slaying take from me
Even a dead man's feeble memory?

"Say not thine help I have been slow to seek;
Here have I been from the first hour of morn,
Who stand before thy presence faint and weak,
Of my one poor delight left all forlorn;
Trembling with many fears, the hope outworn
I had when first I left my love, my shame,
To call upon thine oft-sung glorious name."

He stopped to catch his breath, for as a sob
Did each word leave his mouth; but suddenly,
Like a live thing, the thin flame 'gan to throb
And gather force, and then shot up on high
A steady spike of light, that drew anigh
The sunbeam in the dome, then sank once more
Into a feeble flicker as before.

But at that sight the nameless hope he had
That kept him living midst unhappiness,
Stirred in his breast, and with changed face and glad
Unto the image forward must he press
With words of praise his first word to redress,
But then it was as though a thick black cloud
Altar, and fire, and ivory limbs did shroud.

He staggered back, amazed and full of awe;
But when, with anxious eyes, he gazed around,
About him still the worshippers he saw
Sunk in their wonted works, with no surprise
At what to him seemed awful mysteries;
Therewith he sighed and said, "This, too, I dream,
No better day upon my life shall beam."

And yet for long upon the place he gazed
Where other folk beheld the lovely Queen;
And while he looked the dusky veil seemed raised,
And every thing was as it erst had been;
And then he said, "Such marvels I have seen
As some sick man may see from off his bed:
Ah, I am sick, and would that I were dead!"

Therewith, not questioning his heart at all,
He turned away and left the holy place,
When now the wide sun reddened towards his fall,
And a fresh west wind held the clouds in chase;
But coming out, at first he hid his face
Dazed with the light, and in the porch he stood,
Nor wished to move, or change his dreary mood.

Yet in a while the freshness of the eve
Pierced to his weary heart, and with a sigh
He raised his head, and slowly 'gan to leave
The high carved pillars; and so presently
Had passed the grove of whispering myrtles by,
And, mid the many noises of the street,
Made himself brave the eyes of men to meet.

Thronged were the ways with folk in gay attire,
Nursing the end of that festivity;
Girls fit to move the moody man's desire
Brushed past him; and soft dainty minstrelsy
He heard amid the laughter, and might see,
Through open doors, the garden's green delight,
Where pensive lovers waited for the night;

Or resting dancers round the fountain drawn,
With faces flushed unto the breeze turned round,
Or wandering o'er the fragrant trodden lawn,
Took up their fallen garlands from the ground,
Or languidly their scattered tresses bound,
Or let their gathered raiment fall adown,
With eyes downcast beneath their lovers' frown.

What hope Pygmalion yet might have, when he
First left the pillars of the dreamy place,
Amid such sights had vanished utterly.
He turned his weary eyes from face to face,
Nor noted them, as at a lagging pace
He gat towards home, and still was murmuring,
"Ah life, sweet life! the only godlike thing!"

And as he went, though longing to be there,
Whereas his sole desire awaited him,
Yet did he loath to see the image fair,
White and unchanged of face, unmoved of limb,
And to his heart came dreamy thoughts and dim
That unto some strange region he might come,
Nor ever reach again his loveless home.

Yet soon, indeed, before his door he stood,
And, as a man awaking from a dream,
Seemed waked from his old folly; nought seemed good
In all the things that he before had deemed
At least worth life, and on his heart there streamed
Cold light of day—he found himself alone,
Reft of desire, all love and madness gone.

And yet for that past folly must he weep,
As one might mourn the parted happiness
That, mixed with madness, made him smile in sleep;
And still some lingering sweetness seemed to bless
The hard life left of toil and loneliness,
Like a part song too sweet, too short, and yet
Emmeshed for ever in the memory's net.

Weeping he entered, murmuring, "O fair Queen,
I thank thee that my prayer was not for nought,
Truly a present helper hast thou been
To those who faithfully thy throne have sought!
Yet, since with pain deliverance I have bought,
Hast thou not yet some gift in store for me,
That I thine happy slave henceforth may be?"

Thus to his chamber at the last he came,
And, pushing through the still half-opened door,
He stood within; but there, for very shame
Of all the things that he had done before,
Still kept his eyes bent down upon the floor,
Thinking of all that he had done and said
Since he had wrought that luckless marble maid.

Yet soft his thoughts were, and the very place
Seemed perfumed with some nameless heavenly air;
So gaining courage, did he raise his face
Unto the work his hands had made so fair,
And cried aloud to see the niche all bare
Of that sweet form, while through his heart again
There shot a pang of his old yearning pain.

Yet while he stood, and knew not what to do,
With yearning a strange thrill of hope there came;
A shaft of new desire now pierced him through,
And therewithal a soft voice called his name,
And when he turned, with eager eyes aflame,
He saw betwixt him and the setting sun
The lively image of his lovéd one.

He trembled at the sight, for though her eyes,
Her very lips, were such as he had made,
And though her tresses fell but in such guise
As he had wrought them, now was she arrayed
In that fair garment that the priests had laid
Upon the goddess on that very morn,
Dyed like the setting sun upon the corn.

Speechless he stood, but she now drew anear,
Simple and sweet as she was wont to be,
And all at once her silver voice rang clear,
Filling his soul with great felicity,
And thus she spoke, "Pygmalion come to me.
O dear companion of my new-found life,
For I am called thy lover and thy wife.

"Listen, these words the Dread One bade me say
That was with me e'en now: *Pygmalion,*
My new-made soul I give to thee to-day,
Come, feel the sweet breath that thy prayer has won,
And lay thine hand this heaving breast upon!
Come, love, and walk with me between the trees,
And feel the freshness of the evening breeze

"*Sweep mine hair round thy neck; behold my feet,*
The oft-kissed feet thou thoughtst should never move,
Press down the daisies! draw me to thee, sweet,
And feel the warm heart of thy living love
Beat against thine, and bless the Seed of Jove
Whose loving tender heart hath wrought all this,
And wrapped us both in such a cloud of bliss.

"Ah, thou art wise to know what this may mean!
Sweet seem the words to me, and needs must I
Speak all the lesson of the lovely Queen:
But this I know, I would we were more nigh,
I have not heard thy voice but in the cry
Thou utteredst then, when thou believedst gone
The marvel of thine hands, the maid of stone."

She reached her hand to him, and with kind eyes
Gazed into his; but he the fingers caught
And drew her to him, and midst ecstasies
Passing all words, yea, well-nigh passing thought,
Felt that sweet breath that he so long had sought,
Felt the warm life within her heaving breast
As in his arms his living love he pressed.

But as his cheek touched hers he heard her say,
"Wilt thou not speak, O love? why dost thou weep?
Art thou then sorry for this long-wished day,
Or dost thou think perchance thou wilt not keep
This that thou holdest, but in dreamy sleep?
Nay, let us do the bidding of the Queen,
And hand in hand walk through thy garden green;

"Then shalt thou tell me, still beholding me,
Full many things whereof I wish to know,
And as we walk from whispering tree to tree
Still more familiar to thee shall I grow,
And such things shalt thou say unto me now
As when thou deemedst thou wast quite alone,
A madman, kneeling to a thing of stone."

But at that word a smile lit up his eyes
And therewithal he spake some loving word,
And she at first looked up in grave surprise
When his deep voice and musical she heard,
And clung to him as grown somewhat afeard;

Then cried aloud and said, "O mighty one!
What joy with thee to look upon the sun."

Then into that fair garden did they pass
And all the story of his love he told,
And as the twain went o'er the dewy grass,
Beneath the risen moon could he behold
The bright tears trickling down; then, waxen bold,
He stopped and said, "Ah, love, what meaneth this?
Seest thou how tears still follow earthly bliss?"

Then both her white arms round his neck she threw,
And sobbing said, "O love, what hurteth me?
When first the sweetness of my life I knew,
Not this I felt, but when I first saw thee
A little pain and great felicity
Rose up within me, and thy talk e'en now
Made pain and pleasure ever greater grow?"

"O sweet," he said, "this thing is even love,
Whereof I told thee; that all wise men fear,
But yet escape not; nay, to gods above,
Unless the old tales lie, it draweth near.
But let my happy ears I pray thee hear
Thy story too, and how thy blessed birth
Has made a heaven of this once lonely earth."

"My sweet," she said, "as yet I am not wise,
Or stored with words, aright the tale to tell,
But listen: when I opened first mine eyes
I stood within the niche thou knowest well,
And from mine hand a heavy thing there fell
Carved like these flowers, nor could I see things clear,
And but a strange confusèd noise could hear.

"At last mine eyes could see a woman fair,
But awful as this round white moon o'erhead,
So that I trembled when I saw her there,
For with my life was born some touch of dread,
And therewithal I heard her voice that said
'Come down, and learn to love and be alive,
For thee, a well-prized gift, to-day I give.'

"Then on the floor I stepped, rejoicing much,
Not knowing why, not knowing aught at all,
Till she reached out her hand my breast to touch,
And when her fingers thereupon did fall,
Thought came unto my life, and therewithal
I knew her for a goddess, and began
To murmur in some tongue unknown to man.

"And then indeed not in this guise was I,
No sandals had I, and no saffron gown,
But naked as thou knowest utterly,
E'en as my limbs beneath thine hand had grown,
And this fair perfumed robe then fell adown
Over the goddess' feet and swept the ground,
And round her loins a glittering belt was bound.

"But when the stammering of my tongue she heard
Upon my trembling lips her hand she laid,
And spoke again, 'Nay, say not any word,
All that thine heart would say I know unsaid,
Who even now thine heart and voice have made;
But listen rather, for thou knowest now
What these words mean, and still wilt wiser grow.

"'Thy body, lifeless till I gave it life,
A certain man, my servant, well hath wrought
I give thee to him as his love and wife,
With all thy dowry of desire and thought,
Since this his yearning heart hath ever sought;
Now from my temple is he on the way,
Deeming to find thee e'en as yesterday;

"'Bide thou his coming by the bed-head there,
And when thou seest him set his eyes upon
Thine empty niche, and hear'st him cry for care
Then call him by his name, Pygmalion,
And certainly thy lover hast thou won;
But when he stands before thee silently,
Say all these words that I shall teach to thee.'

"With that she said what first I told thee, love,
And then went on, 'Moreover, thou shalt say
That I, the daughter of almighty Jove,
Have wrought for him this long-desired day;
In sign whereof, these things that pass away,
Wherein mine image men have well arrayed,
I give thee for thy wedding gear, O maid.'

"Therewith her raiment she put off from her,
And laid bare all her perfect loveliness,
And, smiling on me, came yet more anear,
And on my mortal lips her lips did press,
And said, 'Now herewith shalt thou love no less
Than Psyche loved my son in days of old;
Farewell, of thee shall many a tale be told.'

"And even with that last word was she gone,
How, I know not, and I my limbs arrayed
In her fair gift, and waited thee alone—
Ah, love, indeed the word is true she said,
For now I love thee so, I grow afraid
Of what the gods upon our heads may send—
I love thee so, I think upon the end."

What words he said? How can I tell again
What words they said beneath the glimmering light,
Some tongue they used unknown to loveless men
As each to each they told their great delight,
Until for stillness of the growing night

Their soft sweet murmuring words seemed growing
loud,
And dim the moon grew, hid by fleecy cloud.

SUCH was the ending of his ancient rhyme,
That seemed to fit that soft and golden time,
When men were happy, they could scarce tell why,
Although they felt the rich year slipping by.
The sun went down, the harvest-moon arose,
And 'twixt the slim trees of that fruitful close
They saw the corn still falling 'neath its light,
While through the soft air of the windless night
The voices of the reapers' mates rang clear
In measured song, as of the fruitful year
They told, and its delights, and now and then
The rougher voices of the toiling men
Joined in the song, as one by one released
From that hard toil, they sauntered towards the
feast
That waited them upon the strip of grass
That through the golden-glimmering sea did pass.
But those old men, glad to have lived so long,
Sat listening through the twilight to the song,
And when the night grew and all things were still
Throughout the wide vale from green hill to hill
Unto a happy harvesting they drank
Till once more o'er the hills the white moon sank.

AUGUST had not gone by, though now was stored
In the sweet-smelling granaries all the hoard
Of golden corn; the land had made her gain,
And winter should howl round her doors in vain.
But o'er the same fields grey now and forlorn
The old men sat and heard the swineherd's horn,
Far off across the stubble, when the day
At end of harvest-tide was sad and grey;
And rain was in the wind's voice, as it swept
Along the hedges where the lone quail crept,
Beneath the chattering of the restless pie.
The fruit-hung branches moved, and suddenly
The trembling apples smote the dewless grass,
And all the year to autumn-tide did pass.
E'en such a day it was as young men love
When swiftly through the veins the blood doth
move,
And they, whose eyes can see not death at all,
To thoughts of stirring deeds and pleasure fall,
Because it seems to them to tell of life
After the dreamy days devoid of strife,
When every day with sunshine is begun,
And cloudless skies receive the setting sun.
On such a day the older folk were fain
Of something new, somewhat to dull the pain
Of sad, importunate old memories
That to their weary hearts must needs arise.
Alas! what new things on that day could come
From hearts that now so long had been the home
Of such dull thoughts? nay, rather let them tell
Some tale that fits their ancient longings well.
Rolf was the speaker, who said, "Friends,
behold
This is e'en such a tale as those once told
Unto my greedy ears by Nicholas,
Before our quest for nothing came to pass."

OGIER THE DANE.

ARGUMENT.

When Ogier was born, six fay ladies came to the cradle where he lay, and gave him various gifts, as to be brave and happy and the like; but the sixth gave him to be her love when he should have lived long in the world: so Ogier grew up and became the greatest of knights, and at last, after many years, fell into the hands of that fay, and with her, as the story tells, he lives now, though he returned once to the world, as is shown in the process of this tale.

WITHIN some Danish city by the sea,
Whose name, changed now, is all unknown to me,
Great mourning was there one fair summer eve,
Because the angels, bidden to receive
The fair Queen's lovely soul in Paradise,
Had done their bidding, and in royal guise
Her helpless body, once the prize of love,
Unable now for fear or hope to move,
Lay underneath the golden canopy;
And bowed down by unkingly misery
The King sat by it, and not far away,
Within the chamber a fair man-child lay,
His mother's bane, the king that was to be,
Not witting yet of any royalty,
Harmless and loved, although so new to life.

Calm the June evening was, no sign of strife
The clear sky showed; no storm grew round the sun,
Unhappy that his day of bliss was done;
Dumb was the sea, and if the beech-wood stirred,
'Twas with the nestling of the grey-winged bird
Midst its thick leaves; and though the nightingale
Her ancient, hapless sorrow must bewail,
No more of woe there seemed within her song
Than such as doth to lovers' words belong,
Because their love is still unsatisfied.
But to the King, on that sweet eventide,
No earth there seemed, no heaven when earth was gone;
No help, no God! but lonely pain alone;
And he, midst unreal shadows, seemed to sit
Himself the very heart and soul of it.
But round the cradle of the new-born child
The nurses now the weary time beguiled
With stories of the just departed Queen;
And how, amid the heathen folk first seen,
She had been won to love and godliness;
And as they spoke, e'en midst his dull distress,
An eager whisper now and then did smite
Upon the King's ear, of some past delight,
Some once familiar name, and he would raise
His weary head, and on the speaker gaze
Like one about to speak, but soon again
Would drop his head and be alone with pain,
Nor think of these, who, silent in their turn,
Would sit and watch the waxen tapers burn
Amidst the dusk of the quick-gathering night,
Until beneath the high stars' glimmering light,
The fresh earth lay in colourless repose.
So passed the night, and now and then one rose
From out her place to do what might avail
To still the new-born infant's fretful wail;
Or through the softly-opened door there came
Some nurse new waked, who, whispering low the name
Of her whose turn was come, would take her place;
Then toward the King would turn about her face
And to her fellows whisper of the day,
And tell again of her just past away.

So waned the hours; the moon arose and grew;
From off the sea a little west-wind blew,
Rustling the garden-leaves like sudden rain;
And ere the moon began to fall again
The wind grew cold, a change was in the sky,
And in deep silence did the dawn draw nigh:
Then from her place a nurse arose to light
Fresh hallowed lights, for, dying with the night,
The tapers round about the dead Queen were;
But the King raised his head and 'gan to stare
Upon her, as her sweeping gown did glide
About the floor, that in the stillness cried
Beneath her careful feet; and now as she
Had lit the second candle carefully,
And on its silver spike another one
Was setting, through her body did there run

A sudden tremor, and the hand was stayed
That on the dainty painted wax was laid;
Her eyelids fell down and she seemed to sleep,
And o'er the staring King began to creep
Sweet slumber too; the bitter lines of woe
That drew his weary face did softer grow,
His eyelids dropped, his arms fell to his side;
And moveless in their places did abide
The nursing women, held by some strong spell,
E'en as they were, and utter silence fell
Upon the mournful, glimmering chamber fair.
But now light footsteps coming up the stair,
Smote on the deadly stillness, and the sound
Of silken dresses trailing o'er the ground;
And heavenly odours through the chamber passed,
Unlike the scents that rose and lily cast
Upon the freshness of the dying night;
Then nigher drew the sound of footsteps light
Until the door swung open noiselessly—
A mass of sunlit flowers there seemed to be
Within the doorway; and but pale and wan
The flame showed now that serveth mortal man,
As one by one six seeming ladies passed
Into the room, and o'er its sorrow cast
That thoughtless sense of joy bewildering,
That kisses youthful hearts amidst of spring;
Crowned were they, in such glorious raiment clad,
As yet no merchant of the world has had
Within his coffers; yet those crowns seemed fair
Only because they kissed their odorous hair,
And all that flowery raiment was but blessed
By those fair bodies that its splendour pressed.
Now to the cradle from that glorious band,
A woman passed, and laid a tender hand
Upon the babe, and gently drew aside
The swathings soft that did his body hide;
And, seeing him so fair and great, she smiled,
And stooped, and kissed him, saying, "O noble child,
Have thou a gift from Gloriande this day;
For to the time when life shall pass away
From this dear heart, no fear of death or shame,
No weariness of good shall foul thy name."
So saying, to her sisters she returned;
And one came forth, upon whose brow there burned
A crown of rubies, and whose heaving breast
With happy rings a golden hauberk pressed;
She took the babe, and somewhat frowning said,
"This gift I give, that till thy limbs are laid
At rest for ever, to thine honoured life
There never shall be lacking war and strife,
That thou a long-enduring name mayst win,
And by thy deeds, good pardon for thy sin."
With that another, who, unseen, meanwhile
Had drawn anigh, said with a joyous smile,
"And this forgotten gift to thee I give,
That while amidst the turmoil thou dost live,
Still shalt thou win the game, and unto thee
Defeat and shame but idle words shall be."
Then back they turned, and therewithal, the fourth
Said, "Take this gift for what it may be worth
For that is mine to give; lo, thou shalt be
Gentle of speech, and in all courtesy
The first of men: a little gift this is,
After these promises of fame and bliss."
Then toward the babe the fifth fair woman went;
Grey-eyed she was, and simple, with eyes bent
Down on the floor; parted her red lips were,
And o'er her sweet face marvellously fair
Oft would the colour spread full suddenly;
Clad in a dainty gown and thin was she,
For some green summer of the fay-land dight;
Tripping she went, and laid her fingers light
Upon the child, and said, "O little one,
As long as thou shalt look upon the sun
Shall women long for thee; take heed to this
And give them what thou canst of love and bliss."
Then, blushing for her words, therefrom she past,
And by the cradle stood the sixth and last,
The fairest of them all; awhile she gazed
Down on the child, and then her hand she raised,
And made the one side of her bosom bare;
"Ogier," she said, "if this be foul or fair
Thou know'st not now, but when thine earthly life
Is drunk out to the dregs, and war and strife
Have yielded thee whatever joy they may,
Thine head upon this bosom shalt thou lay;
And then, despite of knowledge or of God,
Will we be glad upon the flowery sod
Within the happy country where I dwell:
Ogier, my love that is to be, farewell!"

She turned, and even as they came, they passed
From out the place, and reached the gate at last
That oped before their feet, and speedily
They gained the edges of the murmuring sea,
And as they stood in silence, gazing there
Out to the west, they vanished into air,
I know not how, nor whereto they returned.

But mixed with twilight in the chamber burned
The flickering candles, and those dreary folk,
Unlike to sleepers, from their trance awoke,
But nought of what had happed meanwhile they knew.
Through the half-opened casements now there blew
A sweet fresh air, that of the flowers and sea
Mingled together, smelt deliciously,
And from the unseen sun the spreading light
Began to make the fair June blossoms bright,
And midst their weary woe uprose the sun,
And thus has Ogier's noble life begun.

Hope is our life, when first our life grows clear;
Hope and delight, scarce crossed by lines of fear;
Yet the day comes when fain we would not hope;
But forasmuch as we with life must cope,
Struggling with this and that, who knoweth why,
Hope will not give us up to certainty,
But still must bide with us: and with this man,
Whose life amid such promises began
Great things she wrought; but now the time has come
When he no more on earth may have his home.
Great things he suffered, great delights he had,
Unto great kings he gave good deeds for bad;
He ruled o'er kingdoms where his name no more
Is had in memory, and on many a shore
He left his sweat and blood to win a name
Passing the bounds of earthly creatures' fame.
A love he won and lost, a well-loved son
Whose little day of promise soon was done:
A tender wife he had, that he must leave
Before his heart her love could well receive;
Those promised gifts, that on his careless head
In those first hours of his fair life were shed
He took unwitting, and unwitting spent,
Nor gave himself to grief and discontent
Because he saw the end a-drawing nigh.
Where is he now? in what land must he die,
To leave an empty name to us on earth?
A tale half true, to cast across our mirth
Some pensive thoughts of life that might have been;
Where is he now, that all this life has seen?

Behold, another eve upon the earth
Than that calm evening of the warrior's birth!
The sun is setting in the west, the sky
Is bright and clear and hard, and no clouds lie
About the golden circle of the sun;
But East, aloof from him, heavy and dun
Steel-grey they pack, with edges red as blood,
And underneath them is the weltering flood
Of some huge sea, whose tumbling hills, as they
Turn restless sides about, are black or grey,
Or green, or glittering with the golden flame;
The wind has fallen now, but still the same
The mighty army moves, as if to drown
This lone, bare rock, whose shear scarped sides of brown
Cast off the weight of waves in clouds of spray.
Alas! what ships upon an evil day
Bent over to the wind in this ill sea?
What navy, whose rent bones lie wretchedly
Beneath these cliffs? a mighty one it was,
A fearful storm to bring such things to pass.

This is the loadstone rock; no armament
Of warring nations, in their madness bent
Their course this way; no merchant wittingly
Has steered his keel unto this luckless sea;
Upon no shipman's card its name is writ,
Though worn-out mariners will speak of it
Within the ingle on the winter's night,
When all within is warm and safe and bright,
And the wind howls without: but 'gainst their will
Are some folk driven here, and then all skill
Against this evil rock is vain and nought,
And unto death the shipmen soon are brought;
For then the keel, as by a giant's hand,
Is drawn unto that mockery of a land,
And presently unto its sides doth cleave;
When if they 'scape swift death, yet none may leave
The narrow limits of that barren isle,
And thus are slain by famine in a while,
Mocked, as they say, by night with images
Of noble castles among groves of trees,
By day with sounds of merry minstrelsy.

The sun sinks now below this hopeless sea,
The clouds are gone, and all the sky is bright;
The moon is rising o'er the growing night,
And by its shine may ye behold the bones
Of generations of these luckless ones
Scattered about the rock; but nigh the sea
Sits one alive, who uncomplainingly
Awaits his death. White-haired is he and old,
Arrayed in royal raiment, bright with gold,
But tarnished with the waves and rough salt air;
Huge is he, of a noble face and fair,
As for an ancient man, though toil and eld
Furrow the cheeks that ladies once beheld
With melting hearts—Nay, listen, for he speaks!
"God, Thou hast made me strong! nigh seven weeks
Have passed since from the wreck we haled our store,
And five long days well told, have now passed o'er
Since my last fellow died, with my last bread
Between his teeth, and yet I am not dead.
Yea, but for this I had been strong enow
In some last bloody field my sword to show.
What matter? soon will all be past and done,
Where'er I died I must have died alone:
Yet, Caraheu, a good death had it been
Dying, thy face above me to have seen,
And heard my banner flapping in the wind,
Then, though my memory had not left thy mind,
Yet hope and fear would not have vexed thee more
When thou hadst known that everything was o'er;
But now thou waitest, still expecting me,
Whose sail shall never speck thy bright blue sea.

"And thou, Clarice, the merchants thou mayst call,
To tell thee tales within thy pictured hall,
But never shall they tell true tales of me:
Whatever sails the Kentish hills may see
Swept by the flood-tide toward thy well-walled town,
No more on my sails shall they look adown.
"Get thee another leader, Charlemaine,
For thou shalt look to see my shield in vain,
When in the fair fields of the Frankish land,
Thick as the corn they tread, the heathen stand.
"What matter? ye shall learn to live your lives;
Husbands and children, other friends and wives,
Shall wipe the tablets of your memory clean,
And all shall be as I had never been.

"And now, O God, am I alone with Thee;
A little thing indeed it seems to be
To give this life up, since it needs must go
Some time or other; now at last I know
How foolishly men play upon the earth,
When unto them a year of life seems worth
Honour and friends, and these vague hopes and sweet
That like real things my dying heart do greet,
Unreal while living on the earth I trod,
And but myself I knew no other god.
Behold, I thank Thee that Thou sweet'nest thus
This end, that I had thought most piteous,
If of another I had heard it told."

What man is this, who weak and worn and old,
Gives up his life within that dreadful isle,
And on the fearful coming death can smile?
Alas! this man, so battered and outworn,
Is none but he, who, on that summer morn,
Received such promises of glorious life:
Ogier the Dane this is, to whom all strife
Was but as wine to stir awhile the blood,
To whom all life, however hard, was good:
This is the man, unmatched of heart and limb,
Ogier the Dane, whose sight has waxed not dim
For all the years that he on earth has dwelt;
Ogier the Dane, that never fear has felt,
Since he knew good from ill; Ogier the Dane,
The heathen's dread, the evil-doer's bane.

BRIGHT had the moon grown as his words were done,
And no more was there memory of the sun
Within the west, and he grew drowsy now,
And somewhat smoother was his wrinkled brow
As thought died out beneath the hand of sleep,
And o'er his soul forgetfulness did creep,
Hiding the image of swift-coming death;
Until as peacefully he drew his breath
As on that day, past for a hundred years,
When, midst the nurse's quickly-falling tears,
He fell asleep to his first lullaby.
The night changed as he slept, white clouds and high
Began about the lonely moon to close;
And from the dark west a new wind arose,
And with the sound of heavy-falling waves
Mingled its pipe about the loadstone caves;
But when the twinkling stars were hid away,
And a faint light and broad, like dawn of day,
The moon upon that dreary country shed,
Ogier awoke, and lifting up his head
And smiling, muttered, "Nay, no more again;
Rather some pleasure new, some other pain,
Unthought of both, some other form of strife;"
For he had waked from dreams of his old life,
And through St. Omer's archer-guarded gate
Once more had seemed to pass, and saw the state
Of that triumphant king; and still, though all
Seemed changed, and folk by other names did call
Faces he knew of old, yet none the less
He seemed the same, and, midst that mightiness,
Felt his own power, and grew the more athirst
For coming glory, as of old, when first
He stood before the face of Charlemaine,
A helpless hostage with all life to gain.
But now, awake, his worn face once more sank
Between his hands, and, murmuring not, he drank
The draught of death that must that thirst allay.

But while he sat and waited for the day
A sudden light across the bare rock streamed,
Which at the first he noted not, but deemed
The moon her fleecy veil had broken through;
But ruddier indeed this new light grew
Than were the moon's grey beams, and, therewithal,
Soft far-off music on his ears did fall;
Yet moved he not, but murmured, "This is death,
An easy thing like this to yield my breath,
Awake, yet dreaming, with no sounds of fear,
No dreadful sights to tell me it is near;
Yea, God, I thank Thee!" but with that last word
It seemed to him that he his own name heard
Whispered, as though the wind had borne it past;
With that he gat unto his feet at last,
But still awhile he stood, with sunken head,
And in a low and trembling voice he said,
"Lord, I am ready, whither shall I go?
I pray Thee unto me some token show."
And, as he said this, round about he turned,
And in the east beheld a light that burned
As bright as day; then, though his flesh might fear
The coming change that he believed so near,

Yet did his soul rejoice, for now he thought
Unto the very heaven to be brought:
And though he felt alive, deemed it might be
That he in sleep had died full easily.
Then toward that light did he begin to go,
And still those strains he heard, far off and low,
That grew no louder; still that bright light streamed
Over the rocks, yet nothing brighter seemed,
But like the light of some unseen bright flame
Shone round about, until at last he came
Unto the dreary islet's other shore,
And then the minstrelsy he heard no more,
And softer seemed the strange light unto him;
But yet, or ever it had grown quite dim,
Beneath its waning light could he behold
A mighty palace set about with gold,
Above green meads, and groves of summer trees
Far-off across the welter of the seas;
But, as he gazed, it faded from his sight,
And the grey hidden moon's diffused soft light,
Which soothly was but darkness to him now,
His sea-girt island prison did but show.
But o'er the sea he still gazed wistfully,
And said, "Alas! and when will this go by
And leave my soul in peace? must I still dream
Of life that once so dear a thing did seem,
That, when I wake, death may the bitterer be?
Here will I sit until he come to me,
And hide mine eyes and think upon my sin;
That so a little calm I yet may win
Before I stand within the awful place."
Then down he sat and covered up his face,
Yet therewithal his trouble could not hide,
Nor waiting thus for death could he abide,
For, though he knew it not, the yearning pain
Of hope of life had touched his soul again—
If he could live awhile, if he could live!
The mighty being, who once was wont to give
The gift of life to many a trembling man;
Who did his own will since his life began;
Who feared not aught, but strong and great and free
Still cast aside the thought of what might be;
Must all this then be lost, and with no will,
Powerless and blind, must he some fate fulfil,
Nor know what he is doing any more?

Soon he arose and paced along the shore,
And gazed out seaward for the blessed light;
But nought he saw except the old sad sight,
The ceaseless tumbling of the billows grey,
The white upspringing of the spurts of spray
Amidst that mass of timbers, the rent bones
Of the sea-houses of the hapless ones
Once cast like him upon this deadly isle.
He stopped his pacing in a little while,
And clenched his mighty hands, and set his teeth,
And gazing at the ruin underneath,
He swung from off the bare cliff's jagged brow,
And on some slippery ledge he wavered now,
Without a hand-hold, and now stoutly clung
With hands alone, and o'er the welter hung,
Not caring aught if thus his life should end;
But safely amidst all this did he descend
The dreadful cliff, and since no beach was there,
But from the depths the rock rose stark and bare,
Nor crumbled aught beneath the hammering sea,
Upon the wrecks he stood unsteadily.

But now, amid the clamour of the waves,
And washing to-and-fro of beams and staves,
Dizzy with hunger, dreamy with distress,
And all those days of fear and loneliness,
The ocean's tumult seemed the battle's roar,
His heart grew hot, as when in days of yore
He heard the cymbals clash amid the crowd
Of dusky faces; now he shouted loud,
And from crushed beam to beam began to leap,
And yet his footing somehow did he keep
Amidst their tossing, and indeed the sea
Was somewhat sunk upon the island's lee.
So quickly on from wreck to wreck he passed,
And reached the outer line of wrecks at last,
And there a moment stood unsteadily,
Amid the drift of spray that hurried by,
And drew Courtain his sword from out its sheath,
And poised himself to meet the coming death,
Still looking out to sea; but as he gazed,
And once or twice his doubtful feet he raised
To take the final plunge, that heavenly strain
Over the washing waves he heard again,
And from the dimness something bright he saw
Across the waste of waters towards him draw;
And hidden now, now raised aloft, at last
Unto his very feet a boat was cast,
Gilded inside and out, and well arrayed
With cushions soft; far fitter to have weighed
From some sweet garden on the shallow Seine,
Or in a reach of green Thames to have lain,
Than struggle with that huge confuséd sea;
But Ogier gazed upon it doubtfully
One moment, and then, sheathing Courtain, said:
"What tales are these about the newly dead
The heathen told? what matter, let all pass;
This moment as one dead indeed I was,
And this must be what I have got to do,
I yet perchance may light on something new
Before I die; though yet perchance this keel
Unto the wondrous mass of charméd steel
Is drawn as others." With that word he leapt
Into the boat, and o'er the cushions crept
From stem to stern, but found no rudder there,
Nor any oars, nor were the cushions fair

Made wet by any dashing of the sea.
Now while he pondered how these things could be,
The boat began to move therefrom at last,
But over him a drowsiness was cast,
And as o'er tumbling hills the skiff did pass,
He clean forgot his death and where he was.

At last he woke up to a sunny day,
And, looking round, saw that his shallop lay
Moored at the edge of some fair tideless sea
Unto an overhanging thick-leaved tree,
Where in the green waves did the low bank dip
Its fresh and green grass-covered daisied lip;
But Ogier looking thence no more could see
That sad abode of death and misery,
Nor aught but wide and empty ocean, grey
With gathering haze, for now it neared midday;
Then from the golden cushions did he rise,
And wondering still if this were Paradise
He stepped ashore, but drew Courtain his sword
And muttered therewithal a holy word.
Fair was the place, as though amidst of May,
Nor did the brown birds fear the sunny day,
For with their quivering song the air was sweet;
Thick grew the field-flowers underneath his feet,
And on his head the blossoms down did rain;
Yet mid these fair things, slowly and with pain
He 'gan to go, yea, even when his foot
First touched the flowery sod, to his heart's root
A coldness seemed to strike, and now each limb
Was growing stiff, his eyes waxed bleared and dim,
And all his stored-up memory 'gan to fail,
Nor yet would his once mighty heart avail
For lamentations o'er his changéd lot;
Yet urged by some desire, he knew not what,
Along a little path 'twixt hedges sweet,
Drawn sword in hand, he dragged his faltering feet,
For what then seemed to him a weary way,
Whereon his steps he needs must often stay
And lean upon the mighty well-worn sword
That in those hands grown old, for king or lord
Had small respect in glorious days long past.

But still he crept along, and at the last
Came to a gilded wicket, and through this
Entered a garden fit for utmost bliss,
If that might last which needs must soon go by:
There 'gainst a tree he leaned, and with a sigh
He said, "O God, a sinner I have been,
And good it is that I these things have seen
Before I meet what Thou hast set apart
To cleanse the earthly folly from my heart;
But who within this garden now can dwell
Wherein guilt first upon the world befell?"
A little further yet he staggered on,
Till to a fountain-side at last he won,
O'er which two white-thorns their sweet blossoms shed,
There he sank down, and laid his weary head
Beside the mossy roots, and in a while
He slept, and dreamed himself within the isle;
That splashing fount the weary sea did seem,
And in his dream the fair place but a dream;
But when again to feebleness he woke
Upon his ears that heavenly music broke,
Not faint or far as in the isle it was,
But e'en as though the minstrels now did pass
Anigh his resting-place; then fallen in doubt,
E'en as he might, he rose and gazed about,
Leaning against the hawthorn stem with pain;
And yet his straining gaze was but in vain,
Death stole so fast upon him, and no more
Could he behold the blossoms as before,
No more the trees seemed rooted to the ground,
A heavy mist seemed gathering all around,
And in its heart some bright thing seemed to be,
And round his head there breathed deliciously
Sweet odours, and that music never ceased.
But as the weight of Death's strong hand increased
Again he sank adown, and Courtain's noise
Within the scabbard seemed a farewell voice
Sent from the world he loved so well of old,
And all his life was as a story told,
And as he thought thereof he 'gan to smile
E'en as a child asleep, but in a while
It was as though he slept, and sleeping dreamed,
For in his half-closed eyes a glory gleamed,
As though from some sweet face and golden hair,
And on his breast were laid soft hands and fair,
And a sweet voice was ringing in his ears,
Broken as if with flow of joyous tears;
"Ogier, sweet friend, hast thou not tarried long?
Alas! thine hundred years of strife and wrong!"
Then he found voice to say, "Alas! dear Lord,
Too long, too long; and yet one little word
Right many a year agone had brought me here."
Then to his face that face was drawn anear,
He felt his head raised up and gently laid
On some kind knee, again the sweet voice said,
"Nay, Ogier, nay, not yet, not yet, dear friend!
Who knoweth when our linkéd life shall end,
Since thou art come unto mine arms at last,
And all the turmoil of the world is past?
Why do I linger ere I see thy face
As I desired it in that mourning place
So many years ago—so many years,
Thou knewest not thy love and all her fears?"
"Alas!" he said, "what mockery then is this
That thou wilt speak to me of earthly bliss?
No longer can I think upon the earth;
Have I not done with all its grief and mirth?
Yes, I was Ogier once, but if my love
Should come once more my dying heart to move,

Then must she come from 'neath the milk-white
walls
Whereon to-day the hawthorn blossom falls
Outside St. Omer's—art thou she? her name,
Which I remembered once mid death and fame,
Is clean forgotten now; but yesterday,
Meseems, our son, upon her bosom lay:
Baldwin the fair—what hast thou done with him
Since Charlot slew him? Ah, mine eyes wax dim;
Woman, forbear! wilt thou not let me die?
Did I forget thee in the days gone by?
Then let me die, that we may meet again!"

He tried to move from her, but all in vain,
For life had well-nigh left him, but withal
He felt a kiss upon his forehead fall,
And could not speak; he felt slim fingers fair
Move to his mighty sword-worn hand, and there
Set on some ring, and still he could not speak,
And once more sleep weighed down his eyelids
weak.

But, ah! what land was this he woke unto?
What joy was this that filled his heart anew?
Had he then gained the very Paradise?
Trembling, he durst not at the first arise,
Although no more he felt the pain of eld,
Nor durst he raise his eyes that now beheld
Beside him the white flowers and blades of grass;
He durst not speak, lest he some monster was.
But while he lay and hoped, that gentle voice
Once more he heard; "Yea, thou mayst well
rejoice!
Thou livest still, my sweet, thou livest still,
Apart from every earthly fear and ill;
Wilt thou not love me, who have wrought thee
this,
That I like thee may live in double bliss?"
Then Ogier rose up, nowise like to one
Whose span of earthly life is nigh outrun,
But as he might have risen in old days
To see the spears cleave the fresh morning haze;
But, looking round, he saw no change there was
In the fair place wherethrough he first did pass;
Though all, grown clear and joyous to his eyes,
Now looked no worse than very Paradise;
Behind him were the thorns, the fountain fair
Still sent its glittering stream forth into air,
And by its basin a fair woman stood,
And as their eyes met, his new-healéd blood
Rushed to his face; with unused thoughts and
sweet
And hurrying hopes, his heart began to beat.
The fairest of all creatures did she seem;
So fresh and delicate you well might deem
That scarce for eighteen summers had she blessed
The happy, longing world; yet, for the rest,
Within her glorious eyes such wisdom dwelt
A child before her had the wise man felt;
And with the pleasure of a thousand years
Her lips were fashioned to move joy or tears
Among the longing folk where she might dwell,
To give at last the kiss unspeakable.
In such wise was she clad as folk may be,
Who, for no shame of their humanity,
For no sad changes of the imperfect year,
Rather for added beauty, raiment wear;
For, as the heat-foretelling grey-blue haze
Veils the green flowery morn of late May-days,
Her raiment veiled her; where the bands did meet
That bound the sandals to her dainty feet,
Gems gleamed; a fresh rose-wreath embraced her
head,
And on her breast there lay a ruby red.
So with a supplicating look she turned
To meet the flame that in his own eyes burned,
And held out both her white arms lovingly,
As though to greet him as he drew anigh.
Stammering he said, "Who art thou? how am I
So cured of all my evils suddenly,
That certainly I felt no mightier, when,
Amid the backward rush of beaten men,
About me drooped the axe-torn Oriflamme?
Alas! I fear that in some dream I am."
"Ogier," she said, "draw near, perchance it is
That such a name God gives unto our bliss;
I know not, but if thou art such an one
As I must deem, all days beneath the sun
That thou hadst had, shall be but dreams indeed
To those that I have given thee at thy need.
For many years ago beside the sea
When thou wert born, I plighted troth with thee:
Come near then, and make mirrors of mine eyes,
That thou mayst see what these my mysteries
Have wrought in thee; surely but thirty years,
Passed amidst joy, thy new-born body bears,
Nor while thou art with me, and on this shore
Art still full-fed of love, shalt thou seem more.
Nay, love, come nigher, and let me take thine
hand,
The hope and fear of many a warring land,
And I will show thee wherein lies the spell,
Whereby this happy change upon thee fell."

Like a shy youth before some royal love,
Close up to that fair woman did he move,
And their hands met; yet to his changéd voice
He dared not trust; nay, scarcely could rejoice
E'en when her balmy breath he 'gan to feel,
And felt strange sweetness o'er his spirit steal
As her light raiment, driven by the wind,
Swept round him, and, bewildered and half-blind,

His lips the treasure of her lips did press,
And round him clung her perfect loveliness.
For one sweet moment thus they stood, and then
She drew herself from out his arms again,
And panting, lovelier for her love, did stand
Apart awhile, then took her lover's hand,
And, in a trembling voice, made haste to say,—
"O Ogier, when thou camest here to-day,
I feared indeed, that in my play with fate,
I might have seen thee e'en one day too late,
Before this ring thy finger should embrace;
Behold it, love, and thy keen eyes may trace
Faint figures wrought upon the ruddy gold;
My father dying gave it me, nor told
The manner of its making, but I know
That it can make thee e'en as thou art now
Despite the laws of God—shrink not from me
Because I give an impious gift to thee—
Has not God made me also, who do this?
But I, who longed to share with thee my bliss,
Am of the fays, and live their changeless life,
And, like the gods of old, I see the strife
That moves the world, unmoved if so I will;
For we the fruit, that teaches good and ill,
Have never touched, like you of Adam's race;
And while thou dwellest with me in this place
Thus shalt thou be—ah, and thou deem'st, indeed,
That thou shalt gain thereby no happy meed
Reft of the world's joys? nor canst understand
How thou art come into a happy land?—
Love, in thy world the priests of heaven still sing,
And tell thee of it many a joyous thing;
But think'st thou, bearing the world's joy and pain,
Thou couldst live there? nay, nay, but born again
Thou wouldst be happy with the angels' bliss;
And so with us no otherwise it is,
Nor hast thou cast thine old life quite away
Even as yet, though that shall be to-day.
"But for the love and country thou hast won,
Know thou, that thou art come to Avallon,
That is both thine and mine; and as for me,
Morgan le Fay men call me commonly
Within the world, but fairer names than this
I have for thee and me, 'twixt kiss and kiss."

Ah, what was this? and was it all in vain,
That she had brought him here this life to gain?
For, ere her speech was done, like one turned blind
He watched the kisses of the wandering wind
Within her raiment; or as some one sees
The very best of well-wrought images
When he is blind with grief, did he behold
The wandering tresses of her locks of gold
Upon her shoulders; and no more he pressed
The hand that in his own hand lay at rest:
His eyes, grown dull with changing memories,
Could make no answer to her glorious eyes:
Cold waxed his heart, and weary and distraught,
With many a cast-by, hateful, dreary thought,
Unfinished in the old days; and withal
He needs must think of what might chance to fall
In this life new-begun; and good and bad
Tormented him, because as yet he had
A worldly heart within his frame made new,
And to the deeds that he was wont to do
Did his desires still turn. But she a while
Stood gazing at him with a doubtful smile,
And let his hand fall down; and suddenly
Sounded sweet music from some close nearby,
And then she spoke again: "Come, love, with me,
That thou thy new life and delights mayst see."
And gently with that word she led him thence,
And though upon him now there fell a sense
Of dreamy and unreal bewilderment,
As hand in hand through that green place they went,
Yet therewithal a strain of tender love
A little yet his restless heart did move.

So through the whispering trees they came at last
To where a wondrous house a shadow cast
Across the flowers, and o'er the daisied grass
Before it, crowds of lovely folk did pass,
Playing about in carelessness and mirth,
Unshadowed by the doubtful deeds of earth;
And from the midst a band of fair girls came,
With flowers and music, greeting him by name,
And praising him; but ever like a dream
He could not break, did all to Ogier seem,
And he his old world did the more desire;
For in his heart still burned unquenched the fire,
That through the world of old so bright did burn:
Yet was he fain that kindness to return,
And from the depth of his full heart he sighed.
Then toward the house the lovely Queen did guide
His listless steps, and seemed to take no thought
Of knitted brow or wandering eyes distraught,
But still with kind love lighting up her face
She led him through the door of that fair place,
While round about them did the damsels press;
And he was moved by all that loveliness
As one might be, who, lying half asleep
In the May morning, notes the light wind sweep
Over the tulip-beds: no more to him
Were gleaming eyes, red lips, and bodies slim,
Amidst that dream, although the first surprise
Of hurried love wherewith the Queen's sweet eyes
Had smitten him, still in his heart did stir.

And so at last he came, led on by her
Into a hall wherein a fair throne was,
And hand in hand thereto the twain did pass;
And there she bade him sit, and when alone
He took his place upon the double throne,
She cast herself before him on her knees,

Embracing his, and greatly did increase
The shame and love that vexed his troubled heart:
But now a line of girls the crowd did part,
Lovelier than all, and Ogier could behold
One in their midst who bore a crown of gold
Within her slender hands and delicate;
She, drawing nigh, beside the throne did wait
Until the Queen arose and took the crown,
Who then to Ogier's lips did stoop adown
And kissed him, and said, "Ogier, what were worth
Thy miserable days of strife on earth,
That on their ashes still thine eyes are turned?"
Then, as she spoke these words, his changed heart burned
With sudden memories, and thereto had he
Made answer, but she raised up suddenly
The crown she held and set it on his head,
"Ogier," she cried, "those troublous days are dead;
Thou wert dead with them also, but for me;
Turn unto her who wrought these things for thee!"
Then, as he felt her touch, a mighty wave
Of love swept o'er his soul, as though the grave
Did really hold his body; from his seat
He rose to cast himself before her feet;
But she clung round him, and in close embrace
The twain were locked amidst that thronging place.

Thenceforth new life indeed has Ogier won,
And in the happy land of Avallon
Quick glide the years o'er his unchanging head;
There saw he many men the world thought dead,
Living like him in sweet forgetfulness
Of all the troubles that did once oppress
Their vainly-struggling lives—ah, how can I
Tell of their joy as though I had been nigh?
Suffice it that no fear of death they knew,
That there no talk there was of false or true,
Of right or wrong, for traitors came not there;
That everything was bright and soft and fair,
And yet they wearied not for any change,
Nor unto them did constancy seem strange.
Love knew they, but its pain they never had,
But with each other's joy were they made glad;
Nor were their lives wasted by hidden fire,
Nor knew they of the unfulfilled desire
That turns to ashes all the joys of earth.
Nor knew they yearning love amidst the dearth
Of kind and loving hearts to spend it on,
Nor dreamed of discontent when all was won;
Nor need they struggle after wealth and fame;
Still was the calm flow of their lives the same,
And yet, I say, they wearied not of it—
So did the promised days by Ogier flit.

THINK that a hundred years have now passed by,
Since ye beheld Ogier lie down to die
Beside the fountain; think that now ye are
In France, made dangerous with wasting war;
In Paris, where about each guarded gate,
Gathered in knots, the anxious people wait,
And press around each new-come man to learn
If Harfleur now the pagan wasters burn,
Or if the Rouen folk can keep their chain,
Or Pont de l'Arche unburnt still guards the Seine?
Or if 'tis true that Andelys succour wants?
That Vernon's folk are fleeing east to Mantes?
When will they come? or rather is it true
That a great band the Constable o'erthrew
Upon the marshes of the lower Seine,
And that their long-ships, turning back again,
Caught by the high-raised waters of the bore
Were driven here and there and cast ashore?
Such questions did they ask, and, as fresh men
Came hurrying in, they asked them o'er again,
And from scared folk, or fools, or ignorant,
Still got new lies, or tidings very scant.

But now amidst these men at last came one,
A little ere the setting of the sun,
With two stout men behind him, armed right well;
Who ever as they rode on, sooth to tell,
With doubtful eyes upon their master stared,
Or looked about like troubled men and scared.
And he they served was noteworthy indeed;
Of ancient fashion were his arms and weed,
Rich past the wont of men in those sad times;
His face was bronzed, as though by burning climes,
But lovely as the image of a god
Carved in the days before on earth Christ trod;
But solemn were his eyes, and grey as glass,
And like to ruddy gold his fine hair was;
A mighty man he was, and taller far
Than those who on that day must bear the war
The pagans waged: he by the warders stayed,
Scarce looked on them, but straight their words obeyed
And showed his pass; then, asked about his name
And from what city of the world he came,
Said, that men called him now the Ancient Knight,
That he was come midst the king's men to fight
From St. Omer; and as he spoke, he gazed
Down on the thronging street as one amazed,
And answered no more to the questioning
Of frightened folk of this or that sad thing;
But, ere he passed on, turned about at last
And on the wondering guard a strange look cast,
And said, "St. Mary! do such men as ye
Fight with the wasters from across the sea?
Then, certes, are ye lost, however good
Your hearts may be; not such were those who stood
Beside the Hammer-bearer years agone."
So said he, and as his fair armour shone

With beauty of a time long passed away,
So with the music of another day
His deep voice thrilled the awe-struck, listening folk.

Yet from the crowd a mocking voice outbroke,
That cried, "Be merry, masters, fear ye nought,
Surely good succour to our side is brought;
For here is Charlemaine come off his tomb
To save his faithful city from its doom."
"Yea," said another, "this is certain news,
Surely ye know how all the carvers use
To carve the dead man's image at the best,
That guards the place where he may lie at rest;
Wherefore this living image looks indeed,
Spite of his ancient tongue and marvellous weed,
To have but thirty summers."
At the name
Of Charlemaine, he turned to whence there came
The mocking voice, and somewhat knit his brow,
And seemed as he would speak, but scarce knew how;
So with a half-sigh soon sank back again
Into his dream, and shook his well-wrought rein,
And silently went on upon his way.

And this was Ogier: on what evil day
Has he then stumbled, that he needs must come,
Midst war and ravage, to the ancient home
Of his desires? did he grow weary then,
And wish to strive once more with foolish men
For worthless things? or is fair Avallon
Sunk in the sea, and all that glory gone?
Nay, thus it happed—One day she came to him
And said, "Ogier, thy name is waxing dim
Upon the world that thou rememberest not;
The heathen men are thick on many a spot
Thine eyes have seen, and which I love therefore;
And God will give His wonted help no more.
Wilt thou, then, help? canst thou have any mind
To give thy banner once more to the wind?
Since greater glory thou shalt win for this
Than erst thou gatheredst ere thou cam'st to bliss!
For men are dwindled both in heart and frame,
Nor holds the fair land any such a name
As thine, when thou wert living midst thy peers;
The world is worser for these hundred years."
From his calm eyes there gleamed a little fire,
And in his voice was something of desire,
To see the land where he was used to be,
As now he answered: "Nay, choose thou for me,
Thou art the wisest; it is more than well
Within this peaceful place with thee to dwell:
Nor ill perchance in that old land to die,
If, dying, I keep not the memory
Of this fair life of ours." "Nay, nay," said she,
"As to thy dying, that shall never be,
Whiles that thou keep'st my ring—and now, behold,
I take from thee thy charmed crown of gold,
And thou wilt be the Ogier that thou wast
Ere on the loadstone rock thy ship was cast:
Yet thou shalt have thy youthful body still,
And I will guard thy life from every ill."

So was it done, and Ogier, armed right well,
Sleeping, was borne away by some strong spell,
And set upon the Flemish coast; and thence
Turned to St. Omer, with a doubtful sense
Of being in some wild dream, the while he knew
That great delight forgotten was his due,
That all which there might hap was of small worth.
So on he went, and sometimes unto mirth
Did his attire move the country-folk,
But oftener when strange speeches from him broke
Concerning men and things for long years dead,
He filled the listeners with great awe and dread;
For in such wild times as these people were
Are men soon moved to wonder and to fear.

Now through the streets of Paris did he ride,
And at a certain hostel did abide
Throughout that night, and ere he went next day
He saw a book that on a table lay,
And opening it 'gan read in lazy mood:
But long before it in that place he stood,
Noting nought else; for it did chronicle
The deeds of men whom once he knew right well,
When they were living in the flesh with him:
Yea, his own deeds he saw, grown strange and dim
Already, and true stories mixed with lies,
Until, with many thronging memories
Of those old days, his heart was so oppressed,
He 'gan to wish that he might lie at rest,
Forgetting all things: for indeed by this
Little remembrance had he of the bliss
That wrapped his soul in peaceful Avallon.

But his changed life he needs must carry on;
For ye shall know the Queen was gathering men
To send unto the good King, who as then
In Rouen lay, beset by many a band
Of those who carried terror through the land,
And still by messengers for help he prayed:
Therefore a mighty muster was being made,
Of weak and strong, and brave and timorous,
Before the Queen anigh her royal house.
So thither on this morn did Ogier turn,
Some certain news about the war to learn;
And when he came at last into the square,
And saw the ancient palace great and fair
Rise up before him as in other days,
And in the merry morn the bright sun's rays
Glittering on gathered helms and moving spears,

He 'gan to feel as in the long-past years,
And his heart stirred within him. Now the Queen
Came from within, right royally beseen,
And took her seat beneath a canopy,
With lords and captains of the war anigh;
And as she came a mighty shout arose,
And round about began the knights to close,
Their oath of fealty to swear anew,
And learn what service they had got to do.
But so it was, that some their shouts must stay
To gaze at Ogier as he took his way
Through the thronged place; and quickly too he gat
Unto the place whereas the Lady sat,
For men gave place unto him, fearing him:
For not alone was he most huge of limb,
And dangerous, but something in his face,
As his calm eyes looked o'er the crowded place,
Struck men with awe; and in the ancient days,
When men might hope alive on gods to gaze,
They would have thought, "The gods yet love our town
And from the heavens have sent a great one down."
Withal unto the throne he came so near,
That he the Queen's sweet measured voice could hear;
And swiftly now within him wrought the change
That first he felt amid those faces strange;
And his heart burned to taste the hurrying life
With such desires, such changing sweetness rife.
And yet, indeed, how should he live alone,
Who in the old past days such friends had known?
Then he began to think of Caraheu,
Of Bellicent the fair, and once more knew
The bitter pain of rent and ended love.
But while with hope and vain regret he strove,
He found none 'twixt him and the Queen's high seat,
And, stepping forth, he knelt before her feet
And took her hand to swear, as was the way
Of doing fealty in that ancient day,
And raised his eyes to hers; as fair was she
As any woman of the world might be,
Full-limbed and tall, dark-haired; from her deep eyes,
The snare of fools, the ruin of the wise,
Love looked unchecked; and now her dainty hand,
The well-knit holder of the golden wand,
Trembled in his, she cast her eyes adown,
And her sweet brow was knitted to a frown,
As he, the taker of such oaths of yore,
Now unto her all due obedience swore,
Yet gave himself no name; and now the Queen,
Awed by his voice as other folk had been,
Yet felt a trembling hope within her rise
Too sweet to think of, and with love's surprise
Her cheek grew pale; she said, "Thy style and name
Thou tellest not, nor what land of thy fame
Is glad; for, certes, some land must be glad,
That in its bounds her house thy mother had."
"Lady," he said, "from what far land I come
I well might tell thee, but another home
Have I long dwelt in, and its name have I
Forgotten now, forgotten utterly
Who were my fellows, and what deeds they did;
Therefore, indeed, shall my first name be hid
And my first country; call me on this day
The Ancient Knight, and let me go my way."
He rose withal, for she her fingers fair
Had drawn aback, and on him 'gan to stare
As one afeard; for something terrible
Was in his speech; and that she knew right well,
Who 'gan to love him, and to fear that she,
Shut out by some strange deadly mystery,
Should never gain from him an equal love;
Yet, as from her high seat he 'gan to move,
She said, "O Ancient Knight, come presently,
When we have done this muster, unto me,
And thou shalt have thy charge and due command
For freeing from our foes this wretched land!"
Then Ogier made his reverence and went,
And somewhat could perceive of her intent;
For in his heart life grew, and love with life
Grew, and therewith, 'twixt love and fame, was strife.
But, as he slowly gat him from the square,
Gazing at all the people gathered there,
A squire of the Queen's behind him came,
And breathless, called him by his new-coined name,
And bade him turn, because the Queen now bade,
Since by the muster long she might be stayed,
That to the palace he should bring him straight,
Midst sport and play her coming back to wait;
Then Ogier turned, nought loath, and with him went,
And to a postern-gate his steps he bent,
That Ogier knew right well in days of old;
Worn was it now, and the bright hues and gold
Upon the shields above, with lapse of days,
Were faded much: but now did Ogier gaze
Upon the garden where he walked of yore,
Holding the hands that he should see no more;
For all was changed except the palace fair,
That Charlemaine's own eyes had seen built there
Ere Ogier knew him; there the squire did lead
The Ancient Knight, who still took little heed
Of all the things that by the way he said,
For all his thoughts were on the days long dead.
There in the painted hall he sat again,
And 'neath the pictured eyes of Charlemaine
He ate and drank, and felt it like a dream;
And midst his growing longings yet might deem

That he from sleep should wake up presently
In some fair city on the Syrian sea,
Or on the brown rocks of the loadstone isle.
But fain to be alone, within a while
He gat him to the garden, and there passed
By wondering squires and damsels, till at last,
Far from the merry folk who needs must play,
If on the world were coming its last day,
He sat him down; and through his mind there ran
Faint thoughts of that day, when, outworn and wan,
He lay down by the fountain-side to die.
But when he strove to gain clear memory
Of what had happed since on the isle he lay
Waiting for death, a hopeless castaway,
Thought, failing him, would rather bring again
His life among the peers of Charlemaine,
And vex his soul with hapless memories;
Until at last, worn out by thought of these,
And hopeless striving to find what was true,
And pondering on the deeds he had to do
Ere he returned, whereto he could not tell,
Sweet sleep upon his wearied spirit fell.
And on the afternoon of that fair day,
Forgetting all, beneath the trees he lay.

Meanwhile the Queen, affairs of state being done,
Went through the gardens with one dame alone
Seeking for Ogier, whom at last she found
Laid sleeping on the daisy-sprinkled ground
Dreaming, I know not what, of other days.
Then on him for a while the Queen did gaze,
Drawing sweet poison from the lovely sight,
Then to her fellow turned, "The Ancient Knight—
What means he by this word of his?" she said;
"He were well mated with some lovely maid
Just pondering on the late-heard name of love."
"Softly, my lady, he begins to move,"
Her fellow said, a woman old and grey;
"Look now, his arms are of another day;
None know him or his deeds; thy squire just said
He asked about the state of men long dead;
I fear what he may be; look, seest thou not
That ring that on one finger he has got,
Where figures strange upon the gold are wrought:
God grant that he from hell has not been brought
For our confusion, in this doleful war,
Who surely in enough of trouble are
Without such help;" then the Queen turned aside
Awhile, her drawn and troubled face to hide,
For lurking dread this speech within her stirred;
But yet she said, "Thou sayest a foolish word,
This man is come against our enemies
To fight for us." Then down upon her knees
Fell the old woman by the sleeping knight,
And from his hand she drew with fingers light
The wondrous ring, and scarce again could rise
Ere 'neath the trembling Queen's bewildered eyes
The change began; his golden hair turned white,
His smooth cheek wrinkled, and his breathing light
Was turned to troublous struggling for his breath,
And on his shrunk lips lay the hand of death;
And, scarce less pale than he, the trembling Queen
Stood thinking on the beauty she had seen
And longed for but a little while ago;
Yet with her terror still her love did grow,
And she began to weep as though she saw
Her beauty e'en to such an ending draw.
And 'neath her tears waking he oped his eyes,
And strove to speak, but nought but gasping sighs
His lips could utter; then he tried to reach
His hand to them, as though he would beseech
The gift of what was his: but all the while
The crone gazed on them with an evil smile,
Then holding toward the Queen that wondrous ring,
She said, "Why weep'st thou? having this fair thing,
Thou, losing nought the beauty that thou hast,
May'st watch the vainly struggling world go past,
Thyself unchanged." The Queen put forth her hand
And took the ring, and there awhile did stand
And strove to think of it, but still in her
Such all-absorbing longings love did stir,
So young she was, of death she could not think,
Or what a cup eld gives to man to drink;
Yet on her finger had she set the ring
When now the life that hitherto did cling
To Ogier's heart seemed fading quite away,
And scarcely breathing, with shut eyes he lay.
Then, kneeling down, she murmured piteously,
"Ah, wilt thou love me if I give it thee,
And thou grow'st young again? what should I do
If with the eyes thou thus shalt gain anew
Thou shouldst look scorn on me?" But with that word
The hedge behind her, by the west wind stirred
Cast fear into her heart of some one nigh,
And therewith on his finger hastily
She set the ring, then rose and stood apart
A little way, and in her doubtful heart
With love and fear was mixed desire of life.
But standing so, a look with great scorn rife
The elder woman, turning, cast on her,
Pointing to Ogier, who began to stir;
She looked, and all she erst saw now did seem
To have been nothing but a hideous dream,
As fair and young he rose from off the ground
And cast a dazed and puzzled look around,
Like one just waked from sleep in some strange place;
But soon his grave eyes rested on her face,
And turned yet graver seeing her so pale,

And that her eyes were pregnant with some tale
Of love and fear; she 'neath his eyes the while
Forced her pale lips to semblance of a smile,
And said, "O Ancient Knight, thou sleepest then,
While through this poor land range the heathen men,
Unmet of any but my King and Lord:
Nay, let us see the deeds of thine old sword."
"Queen," said he, "bid me then unto this work,
And certes I behind no wall would lurk,
Nor send for succour, while a scanty folk
Still followed after me to break the yoke:
I pray thee grace for sleeping, and were fain
That I might rather never sleep again
Than have such wretched dreams as I e'en now
Have waked from."
Lovelier she seemed to grow
Unto him as he spoke; fresh colour came
Into her face, as though for some sweet shame,
While she with tearful eyes beheld him so,
That somewhat even must his burnt cheek glow,
His heart beat faster. But again she said,
"Nay, will dreams burden such a mighty head?
Then may I too have pardon for a dream;
Last night in sleep I saw thee, who didst seem
To be the King of France; and thou and I
Were sitting at some great festivity
Within the many-peopled gold-hung place."
The blush of shame was gone, as on his face
She gazed, and saw him read her meaning clear
And knew that no cold words she had to fear,
But rather that for softer speech he yearned.
Therefore, with love alone her smooth cheek burned;
Her parted lips were hungry for his kiss,
She trembled at the near approaching bliss;
Nathless, she checked her love a little while,
Because she felt the old dame's curious smile
Upon her, and she said, "O Ancient Knight,
If I then read my last night's dream aright,
Thou art come here our very help to be,
Perchance to give my husband back to me;
Come then, if thou this land art fain to save,
And show the wisdom thou must surely have
Unto my council; I will give thee then
What charge I may among my valiant men;
And certes thou wilt do so well herein,
That, ere long, something greater shalt thou win:
Come, then, deliverer of my throne and land,
And let me touch for once thy mighty hand
With these weak fingers."
As she spoke, she met
His eager hand, and all things did forget
But for one moment; for too wise were they
To cast the coming years of joy away;
Then with her other hand her gown she raised
And led him thence, and o'er her shoulder gazed
At her old follower with a doubtful smile,
As though to say, "Be wise, I know thy guile!"
But slowly she behind the lovers walked,
Muttering, "So be it! thou shalt not be balked
Of thy desire; be merry! I am wise,
Nor will I rob thee of thy Paradise
For any other than myself; and thou
May'st even happen to have had enow
Of this new love, before I get the ring,
And I may work for thee no evil thing."

Now ye shall know that the old chronicle,
Wherein I read all this, doth duly tell
Of all the gallant deeds that Ogier did,
There may ye read them; nor let me be chid
If I therefore say little of these things,
Because the thought of Avallon still clings
Unto my heart, and scarcely can I bear
To think of that long, dragging, useless year,
Through which, with dulled and glimmering memory,
Ogier was grown content to live and die
Like other men; but this I have to say,
That in the council chamber on that day
The Old Knight showed his wisdom well enow,
While fainter still with love the Queen did grow
Hearing his words, beholding his grey eyes
Flashing with fire of warlike memories;
Yea, at the last he seemed so wise indeed
That she could give him now the charge, to lead
One wing of the great army that set out
From Paris' gates, midst many a wavering shout,
Midst trembling prayers, and unchecked wails and tears,
And slender hopes and unresisted fears.

Now ere he went, upon his bed he lay,
Newly awakened at the dawn of day,
Gathering perplexéd thoughts of many a thing,
When, midst the carol that the birds did sing
Unto the coming of the hopeful sun,
He heard a sudden lovesome song begun
'Twixt two young voices in the garden green,
That seemed indeed the farewell of the Queen.

SONG.

HÆC.

In the white-flowered hawthorn brake,
Love, be merry for my sake;
Twine the blossoms in my hair,
Kiss me where I am most fair—
Kiss me, love! for who knoweth
What thing cometh after death?

ILLE.

Nay, the garlanded gold hair
Hides thee where thou art most fair;
Hides the rose-tinged hills of snow—
Ah, sweet love, I have thee now!
Kiss me, love! for who knoweth
What thing cometh after death?

HÆC.

Shall we weep for a dead day,
Or set Sorrow in our way?
Hidden by my golden hair,
Wilt thou weep that sweet days wear?
Kiss me, love! for who knoweth
What thing cometh after death?

ILLE.

Weep, O Love, the days that flit,
Now, while I can feel thy breath;
Then may I remember it
Sad and old, and near my death.
Kiss me, love! for who knoweth
What thing cometh after death?

Soothed by the pleasure that the music brought
And sweet desire, and vague and dreamy thought
Of happiness it seemed to promise him,
He lay and listened till his eyes grew dim,
And o'er him 'gan forgetfulness to creep,
Till in the growing light he lay asleep,
Nor woke until the clanging trumpet-blast
Had summoned him all thought away to cast:
Yet one more joy of love indeed he had
Ere with the battle's noise he was made glad;
For, as on that May morning forth they rode
And passed before the Queen's most fair abode,
There at a window was she waiting them
In fair attire with gold in every hem,
And as the Ancient Knight beneath her passed
A wreath of flowering white-thorn down she cast,
And looked farewell to him, and forth he set
Thinking of all the pleasure he should get
From love and war, forgetting Avallon
And all that lovely life so lightly won;
Yea, now indeed the earthly life o'erpast
Ere on the loadstone rock his ship was cast
Was waxing dim, nor yet at all he learned
To 'scape the fire that erst his heart had burned.
And he forgat his deeds, forgat his fame,
Forgat the letters of his ancient name
As one waked fully shall forget a dream,
That once to him a wondrous tale did seem.

Now I, though writing here no chronicle
E'en as I said, must nathless shortly tell
That, ere the army Rouen's gates could gain
By a broad arrow had the King been slain,
And helpless now the wretched country lay
Beneath the yoke, until the glorious day
When Ogier fell at last upon the foe,
And scattered them as helplessly as though
They had been beaten men without a name:
So when to Paris town once more he came
Few folk the memory of the King did keep
Within their hearts, and if the folk did weep
At his returning, 'twas for joy indeed
That such a man had risen at their need
To work for them so great deliverance,
And loud they called on him for King of France.

But if the Queen's heart were the more a-flame
For all that she had heard of his great fame,
I know not; rather with some hidden dread
Of coming fate, she heard her lord was dead,
And her false dream seemed coming true at last,
For the clear sky of love seemed overcast
With clouds of God's great judgments, and the fear
Of hate and final parting drawing near.
So now when he before her throne did stand
Amidst the throng as saviour of the land,
And she her eyes to his kind eyes did raise,
And there before all her own love must praise;
Then did she fall a-weeping, and folk said,
"See, how she sorrows for the newly dead!
Amidst our joy she needs must think of him;
Let be, full surely shall her grief wax dim
And she shall wed again."
So passed the year,
While Ogier set himself the land to clear
Of broken remnants of the heathen men,
And at the last, when May-time came again,
Must he be crowned King of the twice-saved land,
And at the altar take the fair Queen's hand
And wed her for his own. And now by this
Had he forgotten clean the woe and bliss
Of his old life, and still was he made glad
As other men; and hopes and fears he had
As others, and bethought him not at all
Of what strange days upon him yet should fall
When he should live and these again be dead.

Now drew the time round when he should be wed,
And in his palace on his bed he lay
Upon the dawning of the very day:
'Twixt sleep and waking was he, and could hear
E'en at that hour, through the bright morn and clear,
The hammering of the folk who toiled to make
Some well-wrought stages for the pageant's sake,
Though hardly yet the sparrows had begun
To twitter o'er the coming of the sun,

Nor through the palace did a creature move.
There in the sweet entanglement of love
Midst languid thoughts of greater bliss he lay,
Remembering no more of that other day
Than the hot noon remembereth of the night,
Than summer thinketh of the winter white.
In that sweet hour he heard a voice that cried,
"Ogier, Ogier!" then, opening his eyes wide,
And rising on his elbow, gazed around,
And strange to him and empty was the sound
Of his own name; "Whom callest thou?" he said.
"For I, the man who lie upon this bed,
Am Charles of France, and shall be King to-day,
But in a year that now is passed away
The Ancient Knight they called me: who is this
Thou callest Ogier, then, what deeds are his?
And who art thou?" But at that word a sigh,
As of one grieved, came from some place anigh
His bed-side, and a soft voice spake again,
"This Ogier once was great amongst great men;
To Italy a helpless hostage led;
He saved the King when the false Lombard fled,
Bore forth the Oriflamme and gained the day;
Charlot he brought back, whom men led away,
And fought a day-long fight with Caraheu,
The ravager of Rome his right hand slew;
Nor did he fear the might of Charlemaine,
Who for a dreary year beset in vain
His lonely castle; yet at last caught then,
And shut in hold, needs must he come again
To give an unhoped great deliverance
Unto the burdened helpless land of France:
Denmark he gained thereafter, and he wore
The crown of England drawn from trouble sore;
At Tyre then he reigned; and Babylon
With mighty deeds he from the foemen won;
And when scarce aught could give him greater fame
He left the world still thinking on his name.
"These things did Ogier, and these things didst thou,
Nor will I call thee by a new name now
Since I have spoken words of love to thee—
Ogier, Ogier, dost thou remember me,
E'en if thou hast no thought of that past time
Before thou camest to our happy clime?"

As this was said, his mazed eyes saw indeed
A lovely woman clad in dainty weed
Beside his bed, and many a thought was stirred
Within his heart by that last plaintive word,
Though nought he said, but waited what should come.
"Love," said she, "I am here to bring thee home;
Well hast thou done all that thou cam'st to do,
And if thou bidest here, for something new
Will folk begin to cry, and all thy fame
Shall then avail thee but for greater blame;
Thy love shall cease to love thee, and the earth
Thou lovest now shall be of little worth
While still thou keepest life, abhorring it.
Behold, in men's lives that so quickly flit
Thus is it; how then shall it be with thee,
Who some faint image of eternity
Hast gained through me?—alas, thou heedest not!
On all these changing things thine heart is hot—
Take then this gift that I have brought from far,
And then may'st thou remember what we are;
The lover and the loved from long ago."
He trembled, and more memory seemed to grow
Within his heart as he beheld her stand,
Holding a glittering crown in her right hand:
"Ogier," she said, "arise and do on thee
The emblems of thy worldly sovereignty,
For we must pass o'er many a sea this morn."
He rose, and in the glittering tunic worn
By Charlemaine he clad himself, and took
The ivory hand, that Charlemaine once shook
Over the people's heads in days of old;
Then on his feet he set the shoes of gold,
And o'er his shoulders threw the mantle fair,
And set the gold crown on his golden hair:
Then on the royal chair he sat him down,
As though he deemed the elders of the town
Should come to audience; and in all he seemed
To do these things e'en as a man who dreamed.

And now adown the Seine the golden sun
Shone out, as toward him drew that lovely one
And took from off his head the royal crown,
And, smiling, on the pillow laid it down
And said, "Lie there, O crown of Charlemaine,
Worn by a mighty man, and worn in vain,
Because he died, and all the things he did
Were changed, before his face by earth was hid;
A better crown I have for my love's head,
Whereby he yet shall live, when all are dead
His hand has helped." Then on his head she set
The wondrous crown, and said, "Forget, forget!
Forget these weary things, for thou hast much
Of happiness to think of."
At that touch
He rose, a happy light gleamed in his eyes;
And smitten by the rush of memories,
He stammered out, "O love! how came we here?
What do we in this land of Death and Fear?
Have I not been from thee a weary while?
Let us return—I dreamed about the isle;
I dreamed of other years of strife and pain,
Of new years full of struggles long and vain."
She took him by the hand and said, "Come, love,
I am not changed;" and therewith did they move
Unto the door, and through the sleeping place
Swiftly they went, and still was Ogier's face

Turned on her beauty, and no thought was his
Except the dear returning of his bliss.
But at the threshold of the palace-gate
That opened to them, she awhile did wait,
And turned her eyes unto the rippling Seine
And said, "O love, behold it once again!"
He turned, and gazed upon the city grey
Smit by the gold of that sweet morn of May;
He heard faint noises as of wakening folk
As on their heads his day of glory broke;
He heard the changing rush of the swift stream
Against the bridge-piers. All was grown a dream.
His work was over, his reward was come,
Why should he loiter longer from his home?

A little while she watched him silently,
Then beckoned him to follow with a sigh,
And, raising up the raiment from her feet,
Across the threshold stepped into the street;
One moment on the twain the low sun shone,
And then the place was void, and they were gone;
How I know not; but this I know indeed,
That in whatso great trouble or sore need
The land of France since that fair day has been,
No more the sword of Ogier has she seen.

Such was the tale he told of Avallon,
E'en such an one as in days past had won
His youthful heart to think upon the quest;
But to those old hearts nigh in reach of rest,
Not much to be desired now it seemed—
Perchance the heart that of such things had dreamed
Had found no words in this death-laden tongue
We speak on earth, wherewith they might be sung;
Perchance the changing years that changed his heart
E'en in the words of that old tale had part,
Changing its sweet to bitter, to despair
The foolish hope that once had glittered there—
Or think, that in some bay of that far home
They then had sat, and watched the green waves come
Up to their feet with many promises;
Or the light wind midst blossom-laden trees,
In the sweet Spring had weighted many a word
Of no worth now, and many a hope had stirred
Long dead for ever.
Howsoe'er that be
Among strange folk they now sat quietly,
As though that tale with them had nought to do,
As though its hopes and fears were something new.
But though, indeed, the outworn, dwindled band
Had no tears left for that once longed-for land,
The very wind must moan for their decay,
And from the sky, grown dull, and low, and grey,
Cold tears must fall upon the lonely field,
That such fair golden hopes erewhile did yield,
And on the blackening woods, wherein the dove
Sat silent now, forgetful of their loves.
Yet, since a little life at least was left,
They were not yet of every joy bereft,
For long ago was past the agony
Midst which they found that they indeed must die;
And now well-nigh as much their pain was past
As though death's veil already had been cast
Over their heads—so, midst some little mirth,
They watched the dark night hide the gloomy earth.

SEPTEMBER.

O COME at last, to whom the spring-tide's hope
Looked for through blossoms, what hast thou for me?
Green grows the grass upon the dewy slope
Beneath thy gold-hung, grey-leaved apple-tree
Moveless, e'en as the autumn fain would be
That shades its sad eyes from the rising sun
And weeps at evé because the day is done.

What vision wilt thou give me, autumn morn,
To make thy pensive sweetness more complete?
What tale, ne'er to be told, of folk unborn?
What images of grey-clad damsels sweet
Shall cross thy sward with dainty noiseless feet?
What nameless shamefast longings made alive,
Soft-eyed September, will thy sad heart give?

Look long, O longing eyes, and look in vain!
Strain idly, aching heart, and yet be wise,
And hope no more for things to come again
That thou beheldest once with careless eyes!
Like a new-wakened man thou art, who tries
To dream again the dream that made him glad
When in his arms his loving love he had.

MID young September's fruit-trees next they met,
With calm hearts, willing such things to forget
As men had best forget; and certainly
E'en such a day it was when this might be
If e'er it might be; fair, without a cloud,
Yet windless, so that a grey haze did shroud
The bright blue; neither burning overmuch,
Nor chill, the blood of those old folk to touch
With fretful, restless memory of despair.
Withal no promise of the fruitful year
Seemed unfulfilled in that fair autumn-tide;
The level ground along the river-side
Was merry through the day with sounds of those
Who gathered apples; o'er the stream arose
The northward-looking slopes where the swine ranged
Over the fields that hook and scythe had changed
Since the last month; but 'twixt the tree-boles grey
Above them did they see the terraced way,
And over that the vine-stocks, row on row,
Whose dusty leaves, well thinned and yellowing now,
But little hid the bright-bloomed vine-bunches.

There day-long 'neath the shadows of the trees
Those elders sat; chary of speech they were,
For good it seemed to watch the young folk there,
Not so much busied with their harvesting,
But o'er their baskets they might stop to sing;
Nor for the end of labour all so fain
But eyes of men from eyes of maids might gain
Some look desired.
So at the midday those
Who played with labour in the deep green close
Stinted their gathering for awhile to eat;
Then to the elders did it seem most meet
Amidst of these to set forth what they might
Of lore remembered, and to let the night
Bury its own dead thoughts with wine and sleep;
So while the loitering autumn sun did creep
O'er flower-crowned heads, and past sweet eyes of grey,
And eager lips, and fresh round limbs that lay
Amid the golden fruit—fruit sweet and fair
Themselves, that happy days and love did bear
And life unburdened—while the failing sun
Drew up the light clouds, was this tale begun,
Sad, but not sad enow to load the yoke,
E'en by a feather's weight, of those old folk.
Sad, and believed but for its sweetness' sake
By the young folk, desiring not to break
The spell that sorrow's image cast on them,
As dreamlike she went past with fluttering hem.

THE DEATH OF PARIS.

ARGUMENT.

Paris the son of Priam was wounded by one of the poisoned arrows of Hercules that Philoctetes bore to the siege of Troy; wherefore he had himself borne up into Ida that he might see the nymph Œnone, whom he once had loved, because she, who knew many secret things, alone could heal him: but when he had seen her and spoken with her, she would deal with the matter in no wise, wherefore Paris died of that hurt.

IN the last month of Troy's beleaguerment,
When both sides, waiting for some God's great hand,
But seldom o'er the meads the war-shout sent,
Yet idle rage would sometimes drive a band
From town or tent about Troy-gate to stand
All armed, and there to bicker aimlessly;
And so at least the weary time wore by.

In such a fight, when wide the arrows flew,
And little glory fell to any there,
And nought there seemed for a stout man to do,
Rose Philoctetes from the ill-roofed lair
That hid his rage, and crept out into air,
And strung his bow, and slunk down to the fight,
'Twixt rusty helms, and shields that once were bright.

And even as he reached the foremost rank,
A glimmer as of polished steel and gold
Amid the war-worn Trojan folk, that shrank
To right and left, his fierce eyes could behold;
He heard a shout, as if one man were bold
About the streams of Simoeis that day—
One heart still ready to play out the play.

Therewith he heard a mighty bowstring twang,
A shaft screamed out 'twixt hostile band and band,
And close beside him fell, with clash and clang,
A well-tried warrior from the Cretan land,
And rolled in dust, clutching with desperate hand
At the gay feathers of the shaft that lay
Deep in his heart, well silenced from that day.

Then of the Greeks did man look upon man,
While Philoctetes from his quiver drew
A dreadful shaft, and through his fingers ran
The dull-red feathers; of strange steel and blue
The barbs were, such as archer never knew,
But black as death the thin-forged bitter point,
That with the worm's blood fate did erst anoint.

He shook the shaft, and notched it, and therewith
Forth from the Trojans rang that shout again,
Whistled the arrow, and a Greek did writhe
Once more upon the earth in his last pain;
While the grey clouds, big with the threat of rain,
Parted a space, and on the Trojans shone,
And struck a glory from that shining one.

Then Philoctetes scowled, and cried, "O fate,
I give thee this, thy strong man gave to me.
Do with it as thou wilt!—let small or great
E'en as thou wilt before its black point be!
Late grows the year, and stormy is the sea,
The oars lie rotten by the gunwales now
That nevermore a Grecian surf shall know."

He spake and drew the string with careless eyes,
And, as the shaft flew forth, he turned about
And tramped back slowly, noting in no wise
How from the Greeks uprose a joyous shout,
And from the Trojan host therewith brake out
Confusèd clamour, and folk cried the name
Of him wherethrough the weary struggle came,

Paris the son of Priam! then once more
O'erhead of leaguer and beleaguered town
Grey grew the sky, a cold sea-wind swept o'er
The ruined plain, and the small rain drove down,
While slowly underneath that chilling frown
Parted the hosts; sad Troy into its gates,
Greece to its tents, and waiting on the fates.

NEXT day the seaward-looking gates none swung
Back on their hinges, whatso Greek might fare,

With seeming-careless mien, and bow unstrung,
Anigh them; whatso rough-voiced horn might dare
With well-known notes, the war-worn warders there;
Troy slept amid its nightmares through the day,
And dull with waking dreams the leaguer lay.

Yet in the streets did man say unto man,
"Hector is dead, and Troilus is dead;
Æneas turneth toward the waters wan;
In his fair house Antenor hides his head;
Fast from the tree of Troy the boughs are shred;
And now this Paris, now this joyous one,
Is the cry cried that biddeth him begone?"

But on the morrow's dawn, ere yet the sun
Had shone athwart the mists of last night's rain,
And shown the image of the Spotless One
Unto the tents and hovels of the plain
Whose girth of war she long had made all vain,
From out a postern looking towards the north
A little band of silent men went forth.

And in their midst a litter did they bear
Whereon lay one with linen wrapped around,
Whose wan face turned unto the fresher air
As though a little pleasure he had found
Amidst of pain; some dreadful, torturing wound
The man endured belike, and as a balm
Was the fresh morn, with all its rest and calm,

After the weary tossing of the night
And close dim-litten chamber, whose dusk seemed
Labouring with whispers fearful of the light,
Confused with images of dreams long dreamed,
Come back again, now that the lone torch gleamed
Dim before eyes that saw nought real as true,
To vex the heart that nought of purpose knew.

Upon the late-passed night in e'en such wise
Had Paris lain. What time, like years of life,
Had passed before his weary heart and eyes!
What hopeless, nameless longings! what wild strife
'Gainst nought for nought, with wearying changes rife,
Had he gone through, till in the twilight grey
They bore him through the cold deserted way.

Mocking and strange the streets looked now, most meet
For a dream's ending, for a vain life's end;
While sounded his strong litter-bearers' feet,
Like feet of men who through Death's country wend
Silent, for fear lest they should yet offend
The grim King satisfied to let them go;
Hope bids them hurry, fear's chain makes them slow.

In feverish doze he thought of bygone days,
When love was soft, life strong, and a sweet name,
The first sweet name that led him down love's ways,
Unbidden ever to his fresh lips came;
Half witting would he speak it, and for shame
Flush red, and think what folk would deem thereof
If they might know Œnone was his love.

And now, Œnone no more love of his,
He worn with war and passion—must he pray,
"O thou, I loved and love not, life and bliss
Lie in thine hands to give or take away;
O heal me, hate me not! think of the day
When as thou thinkest still, e'en so I thought,
That all the world without thy love was nought."

Yea, he was borne forth such a prayer to make,
For she alone of all the world, they said,
The thirst of that dread poison now might slake,
For midst the ancient wise ones nurturéd
On peaceful Ida, in the lore long dead,
Lost to the hurrying world, right wise she was,
Mighty to bring most wondrous things to pass.

Was the world worth the minute of that prayer
If yet her love, despised and cast aside,
Should so shine forth that she should heal him there?
He knew not and he recked not; fear and pride
'Neath Helen's kiss and Helen's tears had died,
And life was love, and love too strong that he
Should catch at Death to save him misery.

So, with soul drifting down the stream of love,
He let them bear him through the fresh fair morn,
From out Troy-gates; and no more now he strove
To battle with the wild dreams, newly born
From that past night of toil and pain forlorn;
No farewell did he mutter 'neath his breath
To failing Troy, no eyes he turned toward death.

Troy dwindled now behind them, and the way
That round about the feet of Ida wound,
They left; and up a narrow vale, that lay,
Grassy and soft betwixt the pine-woods bound,
Went they, and ever gained the higher ground,
For as a trench the little valley was
To catch the runnels that made green its grass.

Now ere that green vale narrowed to an end,
Blocked by a shaly slip thrust bleak and bare
From the dark pine-wood's edge, as men who wend
Upon a well-known way, they turned them there;
And through the pine-wood's dusk began to fare
By blind ways, till all noise of bird and wind
Amid that odorous night was left behind.

And in meanwhile deepened the languid doze
That lay on Paris into slumber deep;
O'er his unconscious heart, and eyes shut close,
The image of that very place 'gan creep,
And twelve years younger in his dreamful sleep,
Light-footed, through the awful wood he went,
With beating heart, on lovesome thoughts intent.

Dreaming, he went, till thinner and more thin,
And bright with growing day, the pine-wood grew,
Then to an open, rugged space did win;
Whence a close beech-wood was he passing through,
Whose every tall white stem full well he knew;
Then seemed to stay awhile for lovingshame,
When to the brow of the steep bank he came,

Where still the beech-trunks o'er the mast-strewn ground
Stood close, and slim and tall, but hid not quite
A level grassy space they did surround
On every side save one, that to the light
Of the clear western sky, cold now, but bright,
Was open, and the thought of the far sea,
Toward which a small brook tinkled merrily.

Him-seemed he lingered there, then stepped adown
With troubled heart into the soft green place,
And up the eastmost of the beech-slopes brown
He turned about a lovesome, anxious face,
And stood to listen for a little space
If any came, but nought he seemed to hear
Save the brook's babble, and the beech-leaves' stir.

And then he dreamed great longing o'er him came;
Too great, too bitter of those days to be
Long past, when love was born amidst of shame;
He dreamed that, as he gazed full eagerly
Into the green dusk between tree and tree,
His trembling hand slid down, the horn to take
Wherewith he erst was wont his herd to wake.

Trembling, he set it to his lips, and first
Breathed gently through it; then strained hard to blow,
For dumb, dumb was it grown, and no note burst
From its smooth throat; and ill thoughts poisoned now
The sweetness of his dream; he murmured low,
"Ah! dead and gone, and ne'er to come again;
Ah, passed away! ah, longed for long in vain!

"Lost love, sweet Helen, come again to me!"
Therewith he dreamed he fell upon the ground
And hid his face, and wept out bitterly,
But woke with fall and torturing tears, and found
He lay upon his litter, and the sound
Of feet departing from him did he hear,
And rustling of the last year's leaves anear.

But in the self-same place he lay indeed,
Weeping and sobbing, and scarce knowing why;
His hand clutched hard the horn that erst did lead
The dew-lapped neat round Ida merrily;
He strove to raise himself, he strove to cry
That name of Helen once, but then withal
Upon him did the load of memory fall.

Quiet he lay a space, while o'er him drew
The dull, chill cloud of doubt and sordid fear,
As now he thought of what he came to do,
And what a dreadful minute drew anear;
He shut his eyes, and now no more could hear
His litter-bearers' feet; as lone he felt
As though amid the outer wastes he dwelt.

Amid that fear, most feeble, nought, and vain
His life and love seemed; with a dreadful sigh
He raised his arm, and soul's and body's pain
Tore at his heart with new-born agony
As a thin quavering note, a ghost-like cry
Rang from the long unused lips of the horn
Spoiling the sweetness of the happy morn.

He let the horn fall down upon his breast
And lie there, and his hand fell to his side;
And there indeed his body seemed to rest,
But restless was his soul, and wandered wide
Through a dim maze of lusts unsatisfied;
Thoughts half thought out, and words half said, and deeds
Half done, unfruitful, like o'er-shadowed weeds.

His eyes were shut now, and his dream's hot tears
Were dry upon his cheek; the sun grown high
Had slain the wind, when smote upon his ears
A sudden rustling in the beech-leaves dry;
Then came a pause; then footsteps drew anigh
O'er the deep grass; he shuddered, and in vain
He strove to turn, despite his burning pain.

Then through his half-shut eyes he seemed to see
A woman drawing near, and held his breath,
And clutched at the white linen eagerly,
And felt a greater fear than fear of death,
A greater pain than that love threateneth,
As soft low breathing o'er his head he heard,
And thin fine linen raiment gently stirred.

Then spoke a sweet voice close, ah, close to him
"Thou sleepest, Paris? would that I could sleep!
On the hill-side do I lay limb to limb,
And lie day-long watching the shadows creep
And change, till day is gone, and night is deep,

Yet sleep not ever, wearied with the thought
Of all a little lapse of time has brought.

"Sleep, though thou calledst me! yet 'midst thy dream
Hearken, the while I tell about my life,
The life I led, while 'mid the steely gleam
Thou wert made happy with the joyous strife;
Or in the soft arms of the Greek king's wife
Wouldst still moan out that day had come too soon,
Calling the dawn the glimmer of the moon.

"Wake not, wake not, before the tale is told!
Not long to tell, the tale of those ten years!
A gnawing pain that never groweth old,
A pain that shall not be washed out by tears;
A dreary road the weary foot-sole wears,
Knowing no rest, but going to and fro,
Treading it harder 'neath the weight of woe.

"No middle, no beginning, and no end;
No staying place, no thought of anything,
Bitter or sweet, with that one thought to blend;
No least joy left that I away might fling
And deem myself grown great; no hope to cling
About me; nought but dull, unresting pain,
That made all memory sick, all striving vain.

"Thou—hast thou thought thereof, perchance anights
—In early dawn, and shuddered, and then said,
'Alas, poor soul! yet hath she had delights,
For none are wholly hapless but the dead.'
Liar! O liar! my woe upon thine head,
My agony that nought can take away!
Awake, arise, O traitor, unto day!"

Her voice rose as she spoke, till loud and shrill
It rang about the place; but when at last
She ended, and the echoes from the hill,
Woeful and wild, back o'er the place were cast
From her lost love a little way she passed
Trembling, and looking round as if afeard
At those ill sounds that through the morn she heard.

Then still she stood, her clenched hands slim and white
Relaxed, her drawn brow smoothed; with a great sigh
Her breast heaved, and she muttered: "Ere the light
Of yesterday had faded from the sky
I knew that he would seek me certainly;
And, knowing it, yet feigned I knew it not,
Or with what hope, what hope my heart was hot.

"That tumult in my breast I might not name—
Love should I call it?—nay, my life was love
And pain these ten years—should I call it shame?
What shame my weary waiting might reprove
After ten years?—or pride?—what pride could move
After ten years this heart within my breast?
Alas! I lied—I lied, and called it rest.

"I called it rest, and wandered through the night;
Upon my river's flowery bank I stood,
And thought its hurrying, changing black and white,
Stood still beneath the moon, that hill and wood
Were moving round me, and I deemed it good
The world should change so, deemed it good, that day
For ever into night had passed away.

"And still I wandered through the night, and still
Things changed, and changed not round me, and the day—
This day wherein I am, had little will
With dreadful truth to drive the night away—
God knows if for its coming I did pray!
God knows if at the last in twilight-tide
My hope—my hope undone I more might hide."

Then looked she toward the litter as she spake,
And slowly drew anigh it once again,
And from her worn tried heart there did outbreak
Wild sobs and weeping, shameless of its pain,
Till as the storm of passion 'gan to wane
She looked and saw the shuddering misery
Wherein her love of the old days did lie.

Still she wept on, but gentler now withal,
And passed on till above the bier she stood,
Watching the well-wrought linen rise and fall
Beneath his faltering breath, and still her blood
Ran fiery hot with thoughts of ill and good,
Pity and scorn, and love and hate, as she,
Half dead herself, gazed on his misery.

At last she spake: "This tale I told e'en now,
Know'st thou 'mid dreams what woman suffered this?
Canst thou not dream of the old days, and how
Full oft thy lips would say 'twixt kiss and kiss
That all of bliss was not enough of bliss
My loveliness and kindness to reward,
That for thy Love the sweetest life was hard?

"Yea, Paris, have I not been kind to thee?
Did I not live thy wishes to fulfil?

Wert thou not happy when thou lovedst me?
What dream then did we have of change or ill?
Why must thou needs change? I am unchanged
still;
I need no more than thee—what needest thou
But that we might be happy, yea e'en now?"

He opened hollow eyes and looked on her,
And stretched a trembling hand out; ah, who
knows
With what strange mingled look of hope and fear,
Of hate and love, their eyes met! Come so close
Once more, that everything they now might lose
Amid the flashing out of that old fire,
The short-lived uttermost of all desire.

He spake not, shame and other love there lay
Too heavy on him; but she spake again:
"E'en now at the beginning of the day,
Weary with hope and fear and restless pain,
I said—Alas, I said, if all be vain
And he will have no pity, yet will I
Have pity—how shall kindness e'er pass by?"

He drew his hand aback, and laid it now
Upon the swathings of his wound, but she
Set her slim hand upon her knitted brow
And gazed on him with bright eyes eagerly;
Nor cruel looked her lips that once would be
So kind, so longed for: neither spake awhile,
Till in her face there shone a sweet strange
smile.

She touched him not, but yet so near she came
That on his very face he felt her breath;
She whispered, "Speak! thou wilt not speak for
shame,
I will not grant for love, and grey-winged Death
Meanwhile above our folly hovereth;
Speak! was it not all false? is it not done?
Is not the dream dreamed out, the dull night gone?

"Hearkenest thou, Paris? O look kind on me!
I hope no more indeed, but couldst thou turn
Kind eyes to me, then much for me and thee
Might love do yet. Doth not the old fire burn?
Doth not thine heart for words of old days yearn?
Canst thou not say—Alas, what wilt thou say,
Since I have put by hope for many a day?

"Paris, I hope no more, yet while ago—
Take it not ill if I must needs say this—
A while ago I cried: Ah! no, no, no!
It is no love at all, this love of his,
He loves her not, I it was had the bliss
Of being the well-beloved—dead is his love,
For surely none but I his heart may move."

She wept still; but his eyes grew wild and strange
With that last word, and harder his face grew
Though her tear-blinded eyes saw not the change.
Long beat about his heart false words and true,
A veil of strange thought he might not pierce
through,
Of hope he might not name, clung round about
His wavering heart, perplexed with death and doubt.

Then trembling did he speak: "I love thee still,
Surely I love thee." But a dreadful pain
Shot through his heart, and strange presage of ill,
As like the ceasing of the summer rain
Her tears stopped, and she drew aback again,
Silent a moment, till a bitter cry
Burst from her lips grown white with agony.

A look of pity came across his face
Despite his pain and horror, and her eyes
Saw it, and changed, and for a little space
Panting she stood, as one checked by surprise
Amidst of passion; then in tender wise,
Kneeling, she 'gan the bandages undo
That hid the place the bitter shaft tore through.

Then when the wound and his still face and white
Lay there before her, she 'gan tremble sore,
For images of hope and past delight,
Not to be named once, 'gan her heart flit o'er;
Blossomed the longing in her heart, and bore
A dreadful thought of uttermost despair,
That all if gained would be no longer fair.

In dull low words she spake: "Yea, so it is,
That thou art near thy death, and this thy wound
I yet may heal, and give thee back what bliss
The ending of thy life may yet surround:
Mock not thyself with hope! the Trojan ground
Holds tombs, not houses now, all Gods are gone
From out your temples but cold Death alone.

"Lo, if I heal thee, and thou goest again
Back unto Troy, and she, thy new love, sees
Thy lovesome body freed from all its pain,
And yet awhile amid the miseries
Of Troy ye twain lie loving, well at ease,
Yet 'midst of this, while she is asking thee
What kind soul made thee whole and well to be,

"And thou art holding back my name with lies,
And thinking, maybe, Paris, of this face—
E'en then the Greekish flame shall sear your eyes,
The clatter of the Greeks fill all the place,
While she, my woe, the ruin of thy race,
Looking toward changed days, a new crown, shall
stand,
Her fingers trembling in her husband's hand.

"Thou that I called love once, wilt thou die thus,
Ruined 'midst ruin, ruining, bereft
Of name and honour? O love, piteous
That but for this were all the hard things cleft
That lay 'twixt us and love; till nought be left
'Twixt thy lips and my lips! O hard that we
Were once so full of all felicity!

"O love, O Paris, know'st thou this of me
That in these hills e'en such a name I have
As being akin to a divinity;
And lightly may I slay and lightly save;
Nor know I surely if the peaceful grave
Shall ever hide my body dead—behold,
Have ten long years of misery made me old?"

Sadly she laughed; and rising wearily
Stood by him in the fresh and sunny morn;
The image of his youth and faith gone by
She seemed to be, for one short minute born
To make his shamed lost life seem more forlorn;
He shut his eyes and moaned, but once again
She knelt beside him, and the weary pain

Deepened upon her face. "Hearken!" she said,
"Death is anear thee; is then death so ill
With me beside thee—since Troy is as dead,
Ere many tides the Xanthus' mouth shall fill,
And thou art reft of her that harmed me still,
Whatso may change—shall I heal thee for this,
That thou may'st die more mad for her last kiss?"

She gazed at him with straining eyes; and he—
Despite himself love touched his dying heart,
And from his eyes desire flashed suddenly,
And o'er his wan face the last blood did start
As with soft love his close-shut lips 'gan part.
She laughed out bitterly, and said, "Why then
Must I needs call thee falsest of all men,

"Seeing thou liest not to save thy life?-
Yet listen once again—fair is this place
That knew not the beginning of the strife
And recks not of its end—and this my face,
This body thou wouldst day-long once embrace
And deem thyself right happy—thine it is,
Thine only, Paris, shouldst thou deem it bliss."

He looked into her eyes, and deemed he saw
A strange and awful look a-gathering there,
And sick scorn at her quivering fine lip draw;
Yet trembling he stretched out his hand to her,
Although self-loathing and strange hate did tear
His heart that Death made cold, e'en as he said,
"Whatso thou wilt shall be remembered;

"Whatso thou wilt, O love, shall be forgot,—
It may be I shall love thee as of old."
As thunder laughs she laughed—"Nay, touch me not!
Touch me not, fool!" she cried. "Thou grow'st a-cold,
And I am Death, Death, Death!—the tale is told
Of all thy days! of all those joyous days,
When thinking nought of me thou garneredst praise.

"Turn back again, and think no more of me!
I am thy Death! woe for thy happy days!
For I must slay thee; ah, my misery!
Woe for the God-like wisdom thou wouldst praise!
Else I my love to life again might raise
A minute, ah, a minute! and be glad
While on my lips thy blessing lips I had!

"Would God that it were yesterday again;
Would God the red sun had died yester-eve,
And I were no more hapless now than then!
Would God that I could say, and not believe,
As yesterday, that years past, hope did leave
My cold heart—that I lived a death in life—
Ah! then within my heart was yet a strife!

"But now, but now, is all come to an end—
Nay, speak not; think not of me! think of her
Who made me this; and back unto her wend,
Lest her lot, too, should be yet heavier!
I will depart for fear thou diest here,
Lest I should see thy woeful ghost forlorn
Here wandering ever 'twixt the night and morn.

"—O heart grown wise, wilt thou not let me go?
Will ye be never satisfied, O eyes,
With gazing on my misery and my woe?
O foolish, quivering heart, now grown so wise,
What folly is it that from out thee cries
To be all close to him once more, once more
Ere yet the dark stream cleaveth shore from shore?"

Her voice was a wail now, with quivering hand
At her white raiment did she clutch and tear
Unwitting, as she rose up and did stand
Bent over his wide eyes and pale face, where
No torturing hope was left, no pain, or fear;
For Death's cold rest was gathering fast on him,
And toward his heart crept over foot and limb.

A little while she stood, and spake no word,
But hung above him, with white heaving breast,
And moaning still as moans the grey-winged bird
In autumn-tide o'er his forgotten nest;
And then her hands about her throat she pressed,
As though to keep a cry back, then stooped down
And set her face to his, while spake her moan:

"O love, O cherished more than I can tell,
Through years of woe, O love, my life and bane,
My joy and grief, farewell, farewell, farewell!
Forgetfulness of grief I yet may gain;
In some wise may come ending to my pain;
It may be yet the Gods will have me glad!
Yet, love, I would that thee and pain I had!

"Alas! it may not be; it may not be;
Though the dead blossom of the late spring-tide
Shall hang a golden globe upon the tree
When through the vale the mists of autumn glide.
Yet would, O Love, with thee I might abide,
Now, now that restful death is drawing nigh—
Farewell, farewell, how good it is to die!"

O strange, O strange, when on his lips once more
Her lips were laid! O strange that he must die
Now, when so clear a vision had come o'er
His failing heart, and keenest memory
Had shown him all his changing life past by;
And what he was, and what he might have been,
Yea, and should be, perchance, so clear were seen!

Yea, then were all things laid within the scale,
Pleasure and lust, love and desire of fame,
Kindness, and hope, and folly—all the tale
Told in a moment, as across him came
That sudden flash, bright as the lightning-flame,
Showing the wanderer on the waste how he
Has gone astray 'mid dark and misery.

Ah, and her face upon his dying face
That the sun warmed no more! that agony
Of dying love, wild with the tale of days
Long past, and strange with hope that might not be—
All was gone now, and what least part had he
In Love at all, and why was life all gone?
Why must he meet the eyes of death alone?

Alone, for she and ruth had left him there;
Alone, because the ending of the strife
He knew, well taught by death, drew surely near;
Alone, for all those years with pleasure rife
Should be a tale 'mid Helen's coming life;
And she and all the world should go its ways,
'Midst other troubles, other happy days.

And yet how was it with him? As if death
Strove yet with struggling life and love in vain,
With eyes grown deadly bright and rattling breath,
He raised himself, while wide his blood did stain
The linen fair, and seized the horn again,
And blew thereon a wild and shattering blast
Ere from his hand afar the thing he cast.

Then, as a man who in a failing fight
For a last onset gathers suddenly
All soul and strength, he faced the summer light,
And from his lips broke forth a mighty cry
Of "Helen, Helen, Helen!"—yet the sky
Changed not above his cast-back golden head,
And merry was the world though he was dead.

BUT now when every echo was as still
As were the lips of Paris, once more came
The litter-bearers down the beach-clad hill
And stood about him crying out his name,
Lamenting for his beauty and his fame,
His love, his kindness, and his merry heart,
That still would thrust ill days and thoughts apart.

Homeward they bore him through the dark woods' gloom
With heavy hearts presaging nothing good;
And when they entered Troy again, a tomb
For them and theirs it seemed.—Long has it stood,
But now indeed the labour and the blood,
The love, the patience, and good-heart are vain—
The Greeks may have what yet is left to gain.

I CANNOT tell what crop may clothe the hills,
The merry hills Troy whitened long ago—
Belike the sheaves, wherewith the reaper fills
His yellow wain, no whit the weaker grow
For that past harvest-tide of wrong and woe;
Belike the tale, wept over otherwhere,
Of those old days, is clean forgotten there.

ALAS too short seemed to those ancien men
The little span of threescore years and ten,
Too hard, too bitter, the dull years of life,
Beset at best with many a care and strife,
To bear withal Love's torment, and the toils
Wherewith the days of youth and joy he spoils;
Since e'en so God makes equal Eld and Youth
Tormenting Youth with lies and Eld with truth;
Well-nigh they blamed the singer too, that he
Must needs draw pleasure from men's misery;
Nathless a little even they must feel
How time and tale a long-past woe will heal,
And make a melody of grief, and give
Joy to the world that whoso dies shall live.
Moreover, good it was for them to note
The slim hand set unto the changing throat,
The lids down drooped to hide the passionate eyes,
Whereto the sweet thoughts all unbid would rise;

The bright-cheeked shame, the conscious mouth, as love
Within the half-hid gentle breast 'gan move,
Like a swift-opening flower beneath the sun;
The sigh and half frown as the tale was done,
And thoughts uncertain, hard to grasp, did flit
'Twixt the beginning and the end of it—
And to their ancient eyes it well might seem
Lay tale in tale, as dream within a dream;
Untold now the beginning, and the end
Not to be heard by those whose feet should wend
Long ere that tide through the dim ways of death.

But now the sun grew dull, the south wind's breath
Ruffled the stream, and spake within the trees
Of rain beyond the hills; the images
The tale wrought, changed with the changed deadening day,
Till dim they grew and vanished quite away.

Now when September drew unto its end,
Unto the self-same place those men did wend
Where last they feasted; and the autumn day
Was so alike to that one passed away,
That, but for silence of the close stripped bare,
And absence of the merry folk and fair,
Whose feet the deep grass, making haste to grow
Before the winter, minded nothing now—
But for the thinned and straightened boughs, well freed
Of golden fruit; the vine-stocks that did need
No pruning more, ere eager man and maid
Brown fingers on the dusty bunches laid—
But for these matters, they might even deem
That they had slept awhile and dreamed a dream,
And woke up weary in the self-same place.

And now as each man saw his fellow's face
They 'gan to smile, beholding this same though
Each in the other's eyes:
"Or all is nought
Whereof I think," at last a wanderer said,
"Or of my tale shall ye be well apaid;
Meet is it for this silent company
Sitting here musing, well content to see
The shadows changing, as the sun goes by:
A dream it is, friends, and no history
Of men who ever lived; so blame me nought
If wondrous things together there are brought,
Strange to our waking world—yet as in dreams
Of known things still we dream, whatever gleams
Of unknown light may make them strange, so here
Our dreamland story holdeth such things dear
And such things loathed, as we do; else, indeed,
Were all its marvels nought to help our need.

THE LAND EAST OF THE SUN AND WEST OF THE MOON.

ARGUMENT.

This tale, which is set forth as a dream, tells of a churl's son who won a fair queen to his love, and afterwards lost her, and yet in the end was not deprived of her.

IN Norway, in King Magnus' days,
A man there dwelt, my story says,
Who Gregory had got to name;
Folk said from outland parts he came,
Though none knew whence; he served withal
The Marshal Biorn in field and hall,
And little, yet was deft of hand
And stout of heart, when men did stand
Spear against spear; and his black eyes
Folk deemed were somewhat overwise.
For of the stars full well he knew,
And whither lives of men they drew.
So Gregory the Star-gazer
Men called him, and somewhat in fear
They held him, though his daily mood
Was ever mild enow and good.
It chanced upon a summer day,
When in the south King Magnus lay,
With all his men, the Marshal sent
A well-manned cutter, with intent
To get him fish for house-keeping,
And Gregory, skilful in this thing,
The skipper over them to be;
So merrily they put to sea,
And off a little island lay,
Amidst the firth, and fished all day,
But when night fell, ashore they went
Upon the isle, and pitched their tent,
And ate and drank, and slept at last.
But while sleep held the others fast
Did Gregory waken, turning oft
Upon his rough bed nothing soft;
Till stealthily at last he rose
And crept from the tent thronged and close
Into the fresh and cloudless night,
And 'neath the high-set moon's cold light
Went softly down unto the sea;
And sleep, that erst had seemed to be
A thing his life must hope in vain,
Now 'gan to fall on him again,
E'en as he reached the sandy bay
Where on the beach their cutter lay.
Calm was the sea 'twixt wall and wall
Of the green bight; the surf did fall
With little noise upon the sand,
Where 'neath the moon the smooth curved strand
Shone white 'twixt dark sea, rocks, and turf.

There, hearkening to the lazy surf,
Musing he scarcely knew of what,
Upon a grey rock Gregory sat,
Till sleep had all its will of him,
And now at last, with slackened limb
And nodding head, he fell to dream;
And far away now did he seem,
Waked up within the great hall, where
King Magnus held right merry cheer
In honour of the Christmas-tide,
At Ladir; and on every side
His courtmen and good bonders sat.
There as folk talked of this and that,
And drank, and all were blithe enow;
Amid the drifting of the snow
And howling of the wind without,
Within the porch folk heard a shout,
And opening of the outer door;
Then one came in, who to the floor
Cast down the weight of snow, and stood
Undoing of his fur-lined hood,
And muttering in his beard the while.
The King gazed on him with a smile,
Then said at last—"What is it then?

Art thou called one of my good men,
And art thou of the country-side,
Or hast thou mayhap wandered wide?
Come sit thee down and eat and drink—
—And yet hast thou some news, I think?"

The man said, "News from over sea
Of Mary and the Trinity,
And goodman Joseph, do I bring;
Nowell, Nowell, Nowell, O King!"

Inward he stalked on, therewithal,
But stopped amidmost of the hall,
And cast to earth his cloak and hood,
And there in glittering raiment stood,
While the maids went about the board
And deftly the cup's river poured,
And 'mid great clank of ewer and horn
Men drank the day when Christ was born.

Then by the King the gold-clad man
Sat, Gregory dreamed, and soon began
Great marvels of far lands to tell,
And said at last:
"Ye serve me well,
And strange things therefore will I show,
Wonders that none save ye may know;
That ye this stormy night may call
A joyful tide in kingly hall,
A night to be remembered."

Then Gregory dreamed he turned his head
Unto the stranger, and their eyes
Met therewith, and a great surprise
Shot through his heart, because indeed
That strange man in the royal weed
Seemed as his other self to be
As he began this history.

In this your land there once did dwell
A certain carle who lived full well,
And lacked few things to make him glad;
And three fair sons this goodman had,
Whereof were two stout men enow
Betwixt the handles of the plough,
Ready to drive the waggons forth,
Or pen the sheep up from the north,
Or help the corn to garner in,
Or from the rain the hay to win;
To dyke after the harvesting,
And many another needful thing.

But slothful was the youngest one,
A loiterer in the spring-tide sun,
A do-nought by the fire-side
From end to end of winter-tide,
And wont in summer heats to go
About the garden to and fro,
Plucking the flowers from bough and stalk;
And muttering oft amid his walk
Old rhymes that few men understood.

"Now is he neither harm nor good,"
His father said; "there, let him go
And do what he has lust to do."

Now so it chanced the goodman had
A meadow meet to make him glad
Full oft because of its sweet grass,
Whereto an ill thing came to pass,
When else the days were drawing nigh
To hay-harvest, and certainly
Our goodman thought all would be won
Before the morrow of St. John.
For as he walked thereto one day
He fell to thinking on the way,
"A fair east wind, and cloudless sky
In scythes before two days go by."
But yet befell a grievous slip
Betwixt that fair cup and the lip,
For when he reached the wattled fence,
And looked across his meadow thence,
His broad face drew into a frown,
For there he saw all trodden down
A full third of the ripening grass,
So that no scythe might through it pass;
Then in a rage he turned away
And was a moody man that day.

But when that eve he sat at home
And his two eldest sons had come
Back from the field, he spake and said:—

"Ill-doers, sons, by likelihood
Be here about, or envious men;
I thought the last had left us, when
Skeggi's two sons put off to sea;
Yet is there left some enemy
Not bold enough on field or way
To draw the sword his debt to pay;
Therefore, son Thorolf, shalt thou go
And bear with thee the great cross-bow,
And hide within the white-thorn brake
And lie there all this night awake
Watching the great south meadow well;
Because last night it so befell
This gangrel thief thought fit to tread
The grass to mammocks by my head!"

So Thorolf rose unwillingly,
And round about his waist did tie
The case of bolts, and took adown
The mighty cross-bow tough and brown,
And in his strong belt set a knife
Lest he should come to closer strife,
And thereon, having drunk full well,
Went on his way, and thought to tell
A goodly tale at break of day.
Thus to the mead he gat, and lay
Close hidden in the hawthorn-brake,
And kept but little time awake,
But on the sorrel slept as soft
As on his truckle in the loft,
Nor woke until the sun was high;
Then looking thence full sleepily
He saw yet more of that fair field,
So dealt with, that it scarce would yield
Much fodder to his father's neat
That summer-tide, of sour or sweet.
Then home he turned with hanging head,
And right few words that tide he said,
In answer to his father's scoff,
But toward the middenstead went off.

So that same night the vexed carle sent
His next son Thord with like intent;
But ere the yellow moon was down
Asleep and snoring lay our clown,
And waking at the dawn could see
The meadow trodden grievously.

Now when unto the house he came,
Speaking no word for very shame,
The good man 'gan to gibe and jeer,
Saying, that many a groat too dear
Such sleepy-headed fools he bought,
That tide when he their mother sought
With Flemish cloth and silver rings
And chains, and far-fetched, dear-bought things
The mariners had sold to him,
For which had many a man to swim
Head downward to the porpoises—
All to get gluttons like to these!

The third son John, who on the floor
Was lying kicking at the door,
Turned round and yawned, and stretched, and said,
"Alas, then, all my rest is sped,
For now thou wilt be sending me,
O father, the third watch to be.
Well, keep thy heart up, I shall know
To-morrow, what thing grieves thee so.

"Yea, yea," his father said, "truly
A noble son thou art to me!
Thou fool, thou thinkest then to win
The game when these have failed therein!
Truly a mighty mind I have
Thy bread and beer henceforth to save,
And send thee with some skipper forth,
Who brings back stockfish from the north;
Then no more dreaming wouldst thou spend
Thy days, but learn to know rope's-end,
And stumble on the icy decks
To no sweet music of rebecks.
—Yet since indeed a fool may do
What no wise man may come unto,
Go thou, if thou hast any will,
Because thou canst not do me ill;
And lo, thou! if thou dost me good
Then will I fill thy biggest hood
With silver pennies for thine own,
To squander in the market-town."

Nought answered John, but turned away,
And underneath the trees all day
He slept, but with the moon arose;
Nor did he arm himself like those,
His brethren, for he thought, "Indeed
Of bolt and bow have I no need,
For if ill-doers there should be,
Then will they slay me certainly,
If I should draw on them a bolt;
And, though my brethren call me dolt,
Yet have I no such foolish thought
For a shaft's whistle to be brought
To death—withal I shall not see
Men-folk belike, but faërie;
And all the arms within the seas
Should help me nought to deal with these;
Rather of such lore were I fain
As fell to Sigurd Fafnir's-bane
When of the dragon's heart he ate.
—Well whatso hap I gain of fate,
I know I will not sleep this night,
But wake to see a wondrous sight."

Therewith he came unto the mead,
And looked around with utmost heed
About the remnant of the hay;
Then in the hawthorn brake he lay
And watched night-long 'midst many a thought
Of what might be, and yet saw nought
As slowly the short night went by,
'Midst bittern's boom and fern-owl's cry;
Then the moon sank, the stars grew pale,
And the first dawn 'gan show the veil
Which night had drawn from tree to tree;
A light wind rose, and suddenly
A thrush drew head from under wing,
And through the cold dawn 'gan to sing,
And one by one about him woke

The minstrels of the feathered folk,
Long ere the first gleam of the sun.
Then, though his watch was but begun,
E'en at that tide, as well he knew,
O'er John a drowsiness there drew,
And nothing seemed so good as sleep,
And sweet dreams o'er his eyes 'gan creep
That made him smile, then wake again
In terror that his watch was vain;
But in the midst of one of these
He started up, for through the trees
A mighty rushing sound he heard,
As of the wings of many a bird;
And, stark awake, with beating heart,
He put the hawthorn twigs apart,
And yet saw no more wondrous thing
Than seven white swans, who on wide wing
Went circling round, till one by one
They dropped the dewy grass upon.
He smiled thereat, and thought to shout
And scare them off; but yet a doubt
Clung to him, as he gazed on those,
And in the brake he held him close,
And watched them bridle there, and preen
Their snowy feathers well beseen;
So near they were, that he a stone
Might have cast o'er the furthest one
With his left hand, as there he lay.

Apace came on the summer day,
Though the sun lingered, and more near
The swans drew, and began to peer
About in strange wise, and John deemed,
In after days, he must have dreamed
Again, if for the shortest space;
For a cloud seemed to dull the place
And silence of the birds there was;
And when he next looked o'er the grass,
Six swan-skins lay anigh his hand,
And nearby on the grass did stand
Seven white-skinned damsels, wrought so fair,
That John must sit and tremble there,
And flush blood-red, and cast his eyes
Down on the ground in shamefast wise,
Then look again with longings sweet
Piercing his heart; because their feet
Moved through the long grey-seeded grass
But some two yards from where he was.

A while in gentle wise they went,
Among the ripe long grass, that bent
Before their beauty; then there ran
A thrill through him as they began,
In musical sweet speech and low,
To talk a tongue he did not know;
But when at last one spake alone,
It was to him as he had known
That heavenly voice for many years,
His heart swelled, till through rising tears
He saw them now, nor would that voice
Suffer his hot heart to rejoice,
In all that erst his eyes did bless
With unimagined loveliness:
Because her face, that yet had been
Alone amongst them all unseen,
He longed for with such strong desire,
That his heart sickened, and quick-fire
Within his parched throat seemed to burn.

A while she stood and did not turn,
While still the music of her voice
Made the birds' song seem tuneless noise
And she alone of all did stand,
Holding within her down-drooped hand
The swan-skin—like a pink-tinged rose
Plucked from amidst a July close,
And laid on January snow,
Her fingers on the plumes did show:
A rosy flame of inner love
Seemed glowing through her; she did move
Lightly at whiles, or the soft wind
Played in her hair no coif did bind.
Then did he fear to draw his breath
Lest he should find the hand of Death
Was showing him vain images;
Then did he deem the morning breeze
Blew from the flowery fields of heaven,
Such fragrance to the morn was given.

And now across the long dawn's grey
The climbing sun's first level ray,
Long hoped, yet sudden when it came,
Over the trembling grass did flame,
And made the world alive once more;
And therewithal a pause came o'er
The earth and heaven, because she turned
And with such longing his heart burned
That there he thought he needs must die,
And, breathless, opened mouth to cry.
And yet how soft and kind she seemed;
What a sweet helpful smile there gleamed
Over the perfect loveliness
That now his feeble eyes did bless!

Now fell the swan-skin from her hand,
And silent she a space did stand,
And then again she turned away,
And seemed some whispered word to say
Unto her fellows; and therewith
Their delicate round limbs and lithe
Began to sway in measured time
Unto a sweet-voiced outland rhyme
As they cleft through the morning air
Hither and thither: fresh and fair

Beyond all words indeed were these,
Yet unto him but images
Well wrought, fair coloured: while she moved
Amidst them all, a thing beloved
By earth and heaven: could she be
Made for his sole felicity?—
Yet if she were not, earth and heaven
Belike for nought to men were given
But to torment his weary heart.
He put the thorny twigs apart
A little more to gaze his fill;
And as he gazed a thought of ill
Shot through him: close unto his hand,
Nigher than where she erst did stand,
Nigher than where her unkissed feet
Had kissed the clover-blossoms sweet,
The snowy swan-skin lay cast down.
His heart thought, "She will get her gone
E'en as she came, unless I take
This snow-white thing for her sweet sake;
Then whether death or life shall be,
She needs must speak one word to me
Before I die."
And therewithal
His hand upon the skin did fall
Almost without his will, while yet
His eyes upon her form were set.
He drew it to him, and there lay
Until the first dance died away,
And from amid the rest thereof
Another sprang, whose rhythm did move
Light foot, long hair, and supple limb,
As the wind moves the poplars slim;
Then as the wind dies out again,
Like to the end of summer rain
Amid their leaves, and quivering now
No more their June-clad heads they bow,
So sank the rippling song and sweet,
And gently upon level feet
They swayed, and circle-wise did stand
Each scarcely touching each with hand,
Until at last all motion ceased.

Still as the dewy shade decreased,
Panting John lay, and did not move,
Sunk in the wonder of his love,
Though fear weighed on him; for he knew
That short his time of pleasance grew
Though none had told him.
Now the one
His heart was set on spake alone,
And therewith hand and arm down-dropped,
Their scarce-heard murmuring wholly stopped,
And softly in long line they passed
Unto the thorn-brake, she the last.
Then unto agony arose
John's fear, as once again all close
She was to him. The wind ran by
The notched green leaves, the sun was high,
Dappling the grass whereon he lay:
Fresh, fair, and cheery was the day,
And nought like guile or wizardry
Could one have thought there was anigh;
Till, suddenly, did all things change,
E'en as his heart; and dim and strange
The old familiar world had grown,
That blithe and rough he erst had known,
And racked and ruined time did seem.

A sudden, sharp cry pierced his dream
And then his cleared eyes could behold
His love, half-hid with hair of gold,
Her slim hands covering up her face,
Standing amid the grassy place,
Shaken with sobs, and round her woe,
With long caressing necks of snow
And ruffling plumes, the others stood
Bird-like again. Chilled to the blood,
Yet close he lay and did not move,
Strengthening his heart with thoughts of love,
Wild as a morning dream. Withal
Some murmured word from her did fall,
Closer awhile the swans did press
Around her woeful loveliness,
As though a loth farewell they bade;
And she one fair hand softly laid
Upon their heads in wandering wise,
Nor drew the other from her eyes,
As one by one her body fair
They left, and rose into the air
With clangorous cries, and circled wide
Above her, till the blue did hide
Their soaring wings, and all were gone.

As scarce she knew that she was lone,
She stood there for a little space,
One hand still covering up her face,
The other drooped down, half stretched out;
As if her lone heart yet did doubt
Somewhat was left her to caress.
Yet soon all sound of her distress
Was silent, though thought held her fast
And nought she moved; the field-mouse passed
Close to her feet, the dragon-fly,
A thin blue needle flickered by,
The bee whirled past her as the morn
Grew later, and strange thoughts were born
Within her.
So she raised her head
At last, and, gazing round, she said:
"Is pitying love all dead on earth?
Is no heart left that holds of worth
Love that hands touch not, and that eyes
Behold not? Is none left so wise

As not to know the smart of bliss
That dieth out 'twixt kiss and kiss?"

She stopped and trembled, for she heard
The hawthorn brake beside her stirred,
Then turned round, half unwittingly,
Across the meadow-grass to flee,
And knew not whither, as, half blind,
She heard the rustling twigs behind,
And therewithal a breathless cry
And eager footsteps drawing nigh.
With streaming hair, a little way
She fled across the trodden hay,
Then failed her feet, and turning round,
She cowered low upon the ground,
With wild eyes turned to meet her fate,
E'en as the partridge doth await,
With half-dead breast and broken wing,
The wingéd death the hawk doth bring.

Dim with the horror of that race,
Wild eyes her eyes met, and pale face,
And trembling outstretched hands that moved
No nigher to her body loved,
Whereto they had been brought so near,
For very fear of her wild fear.

So each of other sore afraid,
There fleer and pursuer stayed,
Each gathering breath and heart to speak—
And he too hopeless, she too weak,
For a long space to say a word.

Yet first her own faint voice she heard,
For in his hand she saw the skin,
And deemed she knew what he would win,
And how that morning's deed had gone:

"What have I done? what have I done?
Did I work ever harm to thee,
That thou this day my bane shouldst be?
Why is there such hate in thine eyes
Against me?"
From his breast did rise
A dumb sound, but no word came forth;
She shrank aback yet more:
"What worth,
What worth in all that thou hast done?
For say my body thou hast won,
Art thou God, then, to keep alive,
Unless my will therewith I give?"
E'en as she spake, a look of pain
Twitched at his face; she spoke again:

"For now I see thou hat'st me not,
But thinkest thou a prize hast got
Thou wilt not lightly cast away:
O hearken, hearken!—a poor prey
Thy toils shall take, a thing of stone
Amid your folk to dwell alone
And hide a heart that hateth thee."

He shrank back from her wretchedly,
And dropped his hand and hung his head;
"Nay, now I hate thee not," she said—
"And who knows what may come to be
If thou but give mine own to me,
And free this trembling body here?
Wouldst thou rejoice if thou wert dear,
Dear unto me though far away,
And hope still fed thee day by day?"

She deemed he wept now, as he turned
Away from her, and her heart yearned
Somewhat toward him as she spake:

"And if thou dost this for my sake,
Wilt thou, for all that, deem this morn
Has made thee utterly forlorn?
Hast thou not cast thine arms round Love
At least, thy weary heart to move,
To make thy wakening strange and new,
And dull life false, and old tales true;
Yea, and a tale to make thy life
To speed the others in the strife,
To quicken thee with wondrous fire,
And make thee fairer with desire?
Wilt thou, then, think it all in vain,
The restless longing and the pain,
Lightened by hope that shall not die?
For thou shalt hope still certainly,
And well mayst deem that thou hast part,
Somewhat, at least, in this my heart,
Whatever else therein may be."

He turned about most eagerly
And gazed upon her for a while:
Wild fear had left her, and a smile
Had lit up now her softened face,
Sweet pleading kindness gave new grace
To all her beauty; fresh again
Her cheeks grew, haggard erst with pain.
She saw the deep love in his eyes,
And slowly therewithal 'gan rise,
While something in her heart there moved,
Some pleasure to be well beloved,
Some pain because of doubt and fear,
Of once-loved things grown scarce so dear;
Less clear all things she seemed to see;
Her wisdom in life's mystery
Seemed fleeting, and for very shame
A tingling flush across her came.

But close unto him did she stand,
And, reaching out her shapely hand,

Took his, and in strange searching wise
Gazed on him with imploring eyes;
And with the sweetness of that touch
And look, wrought fear and hope o'ermuch
Within him, and his eyes waxed dim,
And trembling sore in every limb,
He slid adown, and knelt, and said:

"O sweetly certes hast thou prayed,
Nor used vain words, but smitten me
With all the greater agony
For all thy sweetness: so, indeed,
If thou art holpen well at need
By this thy prayer, yet meet it is
Ere this one moment of great bliss
Has turned to nought all life to come,
That thou shouldst hear me ere my doom.
—And yet indeed what prayer to make
Thy heart amid its calm to shake,
When thou art gone—when thou art gone,
And I and woe are left alone!
—What fiercest word shall yet avail
If this my first and last one fail—
Wherewith shall the hard heart be moved
If this move not, that it is loved?"

His eager hand her hand did press,
His eyes devoured her loveliness.
But silent she a short while stood,
Her face now pale, now red as blood,
While her lip trembled, and her eyes
Grew wet to see his miseries,
At last she spake with down-cast head:

"Alas, what shall I do?" she said,
"Thy prayer shall make me sorrow more
Whenas I go to that far shore
I needs must go to; for I know,
Poor soul! that thou wilt let me go,
Since thou art grown too wise and kind
My helpless soul with force to bind—
—Would thou might'st have some part in me!"

She shrank aback afraid, for he
Now sprang up with a bitter cry:
"Thou knowest not my agony!
Thou knowest not the words thou say'st,
Or what a wretched, empty waste
This remnant of my life is grown,
Or how I need thee all alone
To heal the wound this morn has made!
—Why tremblest thou?—be not afraid;
I will not leave thee any more:
Come near to me! My mother bore
No dreadful thing when I was born.
Fear not, thou art not yet forlorn,
As I, as I, as I shall be
If ever thou shouldst go from me."

She shrank no more, but looked adown
And said, "Alas! why dost thou frown?
Wilt thou be ever angry thus?"

Her voice was weak and piteous
As thus she spake, and in her breast
A sob there moved, yet hard she pressed
The hand she held: too sweet was love
For any word his lips to move;
Too sweet was hope that lips might dare
To touch her sweet cheek smooth and fair.
Yet with her downcast eyes she knew
That nigher ever his face drew
To hers, and new-born love did flame
Out from her heart, as now there came
A sound half sigh, half moan from him;
She trembled sore, all things 'gan swim
Before her eyes, nor felt her feet
The firm earth—for all over-sweet
For sight or hearing life 'gan grow,
As panting, and with changed eyes now,
She raised her parted lips to his.

But ere their fair young mouths might kiss,
While hand stole unto hand, and breath
Met breath, the image of cold death,
With his estranging agonies,
Smote on her heart that once was wise;
As touched by some sharp sudden sting,
Back from her love's arms did she spring,
And stood there trembling; and her cry
Rang through the morn:
"Why shouldst thou die
Amidst thy late-won joy?" she said,
"And must I see thee stark and dead
Who have beheld thy gathering bliss?
Touch me no more yet—so it is
That thy fierce heart hath conquered me,
That I no more may look on thee
Without desire—for such an end
I hitherward, belike, did wend,
Led on by fate, and knew it not—
But if thy love is e'en as hot
As thine eyes say, what wilt thou do?
Loved or loved not, still is it so,
That in thy land I may not live.
Too strong thou art that I should strive
With thee and love—Yet what say'st thou?
Art thou content thy love to throw
Unto the waste of time, and dwell
Here in thy land, and fare right well,
Feared, hated maybe, yet through all
A conquering man, whate'er shall fall?
—Or, in mine own land be mine own?
Live long, perchance, yet all unknown,
Love for thy master and thy law,
Nor hope another lot to draw

From out life's urn?—Think of it, then!
Be great among the sons of men
Because I love thee, and forget
That here amid the hay we met—
Or else be loved and love, the while
Life's vision doth thine eyes beguile."

He fell upon his knees, and cried:
"Ah, wilt thou go?—the world is wide
And waste; we were together here
A while ago, and I grew dear
To thee, I deemed—what hast thou said?
Behold, behold, the world is dead,
And I must die, or ere I deal
With its dead follies more, or feel
The dead men's dreams that move men there.
—Alas, how shall I make my prayer
To thee, who lov'dst me time agone,
No more to leave mine heart alone?"

Musing, his eager speech she heard,
And with a strange look, half afeard,
Half pitying, did she gaze on him,
Until through tears that sight waxed dim;
At last she spake:
"No need to pray
Lest I thy love, O love, betray;
But many a thought there is in me
If I through love might clearly see;
—Now the morn wanes fast! dear, arise
And let me hence, lest eviler eyes
Than thine behold my body here,
And thou shouldst buy thy bliss too dear;
So bring me to some place anigh
Amid thick trees, where thou and I
May be alone a little space,
To make us ready for the place
Where love may still be happiness
Unmixed with change and ill distress."

He gazed on her, but durst not speak,
Nor noted how a sigh did break
The sweetness of her speech, but took
Her white hand with a hand that shook
For very love, and o'er the grass,
Scarce knowing where his feet did pass,
He led her, till they came at last
Unto a beech-wood, where the mast
And dry leaves made a carpet meet,
Sun-speckled, underneath their feet.
She stopped him, grown all grave and calm,
And laid lips like a healing balm
Upon his brow and spake:
"Ah, would
That I who know of ill and good,
And thou who may'st learn e'en as much
By misery, might deem this touch
Of calm lips, joy enough to last
Till life with all its whirl were past—
This kiss, and memory of the morn
Whereon the sweet desire was born."

He trembled, and beseechingly
Gazed on her: "Ah, no, no," said she,
"No more with thee this day I strive,
E'en as thou prayedst will I give;
Belike because I may not choose,
Nay, nor may let my own soul loose.
Is it enow?"
Once more he strove,
With some sweet word to bless his love
And might not; but she smiled and said:
"The lovers of old time are dead,
And so too shall it be with thee.
Yea, hast thou heard no history
Of lovers who outlived the love
That once they deemed the world would move?
And so too may it be with thee.
——Nay stretch thy right hand out to me,
Poor soul, and all shall soon be done."

A gold ring with a dark green stone
Upon his finger then she set,
And said: "Thou may'st repent thee yet
The giving of this gift to-day;
Be wise then! Cast the ring away,
Give me mine own and get thee gone;
For all the past, not so alone
Shall thou and I then be, as erst;
Sad, longing, loving, not accurst."

She trembled as she spake, and turned
Unto his eyes a face that yearned
With great desire, although her eyes
Seemed wonderful and overwise.
But pain of anger changed his face,
He said: "I have compelled thy grace,
But not thy love then; do to me
E'en as thou willest, and go free."

She murmured: "Nay, what wilt thou have?
Thou prayedst and the gift I gave,
Giving what I might not withhold,
In spite of wisdom clear and cold.
— Alas, poor heart unsatisfied,
Why wilt thou love? the world is wide
And holdeth many a joyous thing:
Why wilt thou for thy sorrow cling
To that desire which resteth not,
What part soever thou hast got
Of that whose whole thou ne'er shalt gain?
Alas for thee and me! most vain,
Most vain to wrangle more of this!
Come then, where wait us woe and bliss,

Give me the swan-skin, lay thee down,
Nought doubting, on the beech-leaves brown!"

What spell weighed on his heart but love
I know not, but nought might he move
Except to do her whole command;
He lay adown, and on his hand
Rested his cheek; his eyes grew dim,
Yet saw he the white beech-trunks slim
At first; and his fair-footed love
He saw 'twixt sun and shadow move
Close unto him, and languidly
Her rosy fingers did he see
About the ruffled swan-skin white,
Even as when that strange delight
First maddened him; then dimmer grew
His sight, and yet withal he knew
That over him she hung, and blessed
His face with her sweet eyes, till rest,
As deep as death, as soft as sleep,
Across his troubled heart did creep;
And then a long time seemed gone by
And 'mid soft herbage did he lie
With shut eyes, half awake, and seemed
Some dream forgotten to have dreamed,
So sweet, he fain would dream again;
Then came back memory with a pain,
Like death first heard of; with a cry
And fear swift born of memory
He oped his eyes, that dazed with light
Long kept from them, saw nought aright;
But something kind, and something fair,
Seemed yet to be anigh him there,
Whereto he stretched his arms, that met
Soft hands, and his own hands were set
On a smooth cheek, he seemed to know
From days agone;
"Sweet, sweet doth blow
The gentle wind," he said, "whereas
Surely o'er blossoms it doth pass
If any there be made so sweet."

And as he spake, his lips did meet
In one unhoped, undreamed-of kiss,
The very heart of all his bliss.

Like waking from an ecstasy,
Too sweet for truth it seemed to be,
Waking to life full satisfied
When he arose, and side by side,
Cheek touching cheek, hand laid in hand,
They stood within a marvellous land,
Fruitful, and summer-like, and fair.
The light wind sported with her hair,
Crowned with a leaf-like crown of gold,
Or round her limbs drave lap and fold
Of her light raiment strange of hue
That earthly shuttle never knew;
From overhead the blossoms sweet
Fell soft, pink-edged upon her feet,
That moved the grass now, as her voice
Made the soft scented air rejoice
And made him tremble; murmuring:
"Come,
These are the meadows of my home,
My home and thine; much have I now
To tell thee of, and much to show.
Is it with thee, love, as with me,
That too much of felicity
Maketh thee sad? yet sweet it is
That little sadness born of bliss
And thought of death, and memory
That even this perchance goes by."

Too glad his eyes now made his heart
To let his tongue take any part
In all his joy: afraid he felt,
As though but for a while he dwelt
Upon the outer ledge of heaven,
And scarce he knew how much was given
Of all his heart had asked, as she
Led softly on from tree to tree.
He shut his eyes that he might gain
Some image of the world of pain,
Some roughness of the world cast by,
The more his heart to satisfy,
The more to sound the depths of bliss
That now belike was ever his.

But therewithal the dream did break,
And Gregory sat up, stark awake,
And gazing at the surf-line white,
Sore yearning for some lost delight,
Some pleasure gone, he knew not what;
For all that dream was clean forgot.
So rising with a smile and sigh,
He gat him backward pensively
Unto the tent, and passed between
The sturdy sleepers, all unseen
Of sleep-bound eyes, sore troubled yet
That he must needs his dream forget.
So on his rough bed down he lay,
And thought to wake until the day;
But scarce had time to turn him round
Ere the lost wonder was well found
By sleep; again he dreamed that he
Sat at the King's festivity,
Again did that sweet tale go on,
But now the stranger-guest was gone
As though he had not been, and he
Himself, Star-gazing Gregory,
Sat by King Magnus, clad in gold,
And in such wise the sequel told.

MIDST all that bliss, and part thereof,
Full-fed with choicest gifts of love,
The happy lover lived right long
Till e'en the names of woe and wrong
Had he forgotten.—Of his bliss
Nought may we tell, for so it is
That verse for battle-song is meet,
And sings of sorrow piercing-sweet,
And weaves the tale of heavy years
And hopeless grief that knows no tears
Into a smooth song sweet enow,
For fear the winter pass too slow;
Yet hath no voice to tell of Heaven
Or heavenly joys for long years given,
Themselves an unmatched melody,
Where fear is slain of victory,
And hope, held fast in arms of love,
No more the happy heart may move.
Sweet souls, grudge not our drearihead,
But let the dying mourn their dead
With what melodious wail they will!
Even as we through good and ill
Grudge not your soundless happiness,
Through hope whereof alone, we bless
Our woe with music and with tears.

Now deems the tale that three long years
John in that marvellous land abode,
Till something like a growing load
Of unacknowledged longing came
Upon him, mingled with a shame,
Which happiness slew not, that he
Apart from his own kind must be,
Nor share their hopes and fears: withal
A gloom upon his face did fall,
His love failed not to note, and knew
Whither his heart, unwitting, drew.

And so it fell that, on a day,
As musing by her side he lay,
She spake out suddenly, and said:
"What burden on thy soul is laid?
What veil through which thou canst not see?
Think'st thou that I hide aught from thee?"

He caught her in his arms, and cried,
"What is it that from love can hide?
Thou knowest this, thou knowest this!"

"Alas," she said, "yet so it is
That never have I told to thee
What danger crept toward thee and me!
How could I spoil the lovesome years
With telling thee of slow-foot fears,
Or shade the sweetness of our home
With what perchance might never come?
But now we may not turn aside
From the sharp thorn the rose did hide."

He turned on her a troubled face,
And said, "What is it, from what place
Comes trouble on us?"
She flushed red
As one who lies, and stammering said:
"In thine own land, where while ago
Thou dwelledst, doth the danger grow.
How thinkest thou? hast thou such a heart,
That thou and I a while may part
To make joy greater in a while?"

She smiled, but something in her smile
Was like the heralding of tears,
When lonely pain the grieved heart bears.
But he sprang up unto his feet,
Glad 'gainst his will, and cried: "O sweet,
Fear nought at all, for certainly
Thy fated fellow still am I;
Tell me the tale, and let me go
The nighest way to meet the foe."

Something there was, that for a while
Made her keep silence; with a smile
His bright flushed visage did she note,
And put her hand unto her throat
As though she found it hard to breathe;
At last she spake:
"The long years seethe
With many things, until at last
From out their caldron is there cast
Somewhat like poison mixed with food;
To leave the ill, and take the good
Were sweet indeed, but nowise life,
Where all things ever are at strife.
Thou, knowing not belike, and I,
Wide-eyed indeed and wilfully,
Through these three years have ever striven
To take the sweet of what was given
And cast the bitter half aside;
But fate his own time well can bide,
And so it fares with us to-day.
Bear this too, that I may not say
What danger threatens; thou must go
Unto thy land and nothing know
Of what shall be—a hard, hard part
For such as thou, with patient heart
To sit alone, and hope and wait,
Nor strive in anywise with fate,
Whatever doubt on thee may fall,
Unless by certain sign I call
On thee to help me: to this end
Each day at nightfall shalt thou wend
Unto that place, where thou and I
First met; there let an hour go by,
And if thereby nought hap to thee
Of strange, then deem thou certainly
All goeth, or too well or ill
For thee to help, and bide thou still."

She had arisen, side by side
They stood now, and all red had died
From out his face, most wan he grew,
He faltered forth:
"Would that I knew,
If thou hadst ever loved me, sweet!
Then surely all things would I meet
With good heart."
Such a trouble came
Across his face, that she, for shame
Of something hidden, blushed blood-red,
Then turned all pale again, and said:
"Thou knowest that I love thee well!
What shall I do then? can I tell
In one short moment all the love
That through these years my heart did move?
Come nigher, love, and look at me,
That thou in these mine eyes mayst see
If long enow this troubled dream,
That men call life, mine heart may deem
To love thee in."
His arms he cast
About her and his tears fell fast,
Nor was she dry-eyed; slowly there
Did their lips part, her fingers fair
Sought for his hand:
"Come, love," she said,
"Time wears;" withal the way she led
Unto the place where first he woke
Betwixt a hawthorn and an oak,
And said: "Lie down, and dream a dream,
That nought real then may wasted seem
When next we meet! yet hear a word
Ere sleep comes: thou mayst well be stirred
By idle talk, or longings vain,
To wish me in thine arms again;
Long then, but let no least word slip
Of such a longing past thy lip;
For if thou dost, so strangely now
Are we twain wedded, I and thou,
And that same golden green-stoned ring
Is token of so great a thing
That at thy word I needs must come,
Whereso I be, unto thine home;
And so were both of us undone:
Because the great-eyed glaring sun
That lights your world, too mighty is
To look upon our secret bliss.
—What more to say or e'er thou sleep?
I would I yet had time to weep
All that I would, then many a day
Would pass, or thou shouldst go away.
But time wears, and the hand of fate,
For all our weeping, will not wait.
—Yet speak, before sleep wrap thee round,
That I once more may hear the sound
Of thy sweet voice, if never more."

For all her words she wept right sore.
"What wouldest thou?" he said in turn,
"Thou know'st for thee and peace I yearn
Past words—but now thy lips have sealed
My lips with mysteries unrevealed;
How shall I pray, this bitter morn,
That joy and me atwain hath torn?
While yet as in a dream it is
Both bliss and this strange end of bliss.
Ah, what more can I say thereof?
That never any end of love
I know, though all my bliss hath end;
That where thou willest I will wend,
Abide where thou wouldst have me stay,
Pass bitter day on bitter day
Silent of thee, and make no sign
Of all the love and life divine,
That is my life and knowledge now."

And with that word he lay a-low
And by his side she knelt, and took
His last kiss with a lovely look,
Mingled of utmost love and ruth
And knowledge of the hidden truth.
And then he heard her sing again
Unknown words to a soft low strain,
Till dim his senses waxed, nor knew
What things were false, and what were true,
Mid all the things he saw and heard,
But still among strange-plumaged bird,
Strange-fruited tree, and strange-clad maid,
And horrors making not afraid
Of changing man, and dim-eyed beast,
—Through all he deemed he knew at least
That over him his true-love hung
And 'twixt her sobs in sweet voice sung
That mystic song, until at last
Into the dreamless land he passed
Of deep, dark sleep without a flaw
Where nought he heard and nought he saw.

Amidst unreasoning huge surprise,
Remembering nought, he oped his eyes
And leapt up swiftly, and there stood
Blinking upon a close beech-wood
As one who knew not aught of it;
Yet in a while 'gan memory flit
Across him, and he muttered low
Unwitting words said long ago
When he was yet a child; then turned
To where the autumn noon-sun burned
Bright on a cleared space of the wood,
Where midst rank grass a spruce-tree stood,
Tall, grey-trunked, leafless a long way,
And memory of another day,
Like to a dream within a dream
Therewith across his heart 'gan gleam,

And gazing up into the tree,
He raised his right arm suddenly,
E'en as he fain would climb the same;
Then, as his vision clearer came,
He muttered, "Nay, gone is the nest,
Nor is it spring-tide; it were best
Unto the stead to hurry back,
Or else my dinner may I lack,
For father's grip is close enow."
And therewithal, with head hung low,
Even as one who needs not sight,
And looking nor to left nor right,
Through blind ways of the wood he went,
Seeming as he were right intent
On heavy thoughts, as well might be,
But scarcely waked yet verily,
Or knowing in what place he was.
In such wise swiftly did he pass
Without a check straight through the wood,
Until on the slope-side he stood,
Where all its tangles were clean done;
There staying, while the unclouded sun
Gleamed on the golden braveries
That clad him, did he raise his eyes,
And 'neath his shading hand looked thence,
And saw o'er well-tilled close and fence
A little knot of roofs between
Dark leaves, their ridges bright and green
With spiky house-leek; and withal
Man unto man did he hear call
Afar amid the fields below;
And then a hoarse loud horn 'gan blow
No point of war, but peasant-call
To hurry toward the steaming hall.
Then as a red spark lights a flame
Among light straw, all memory came
Back-rushing on his heart, and he
'Gan think of joy and misery,
Trouble and hope, in tangled wise,
Till longing in his heart 'gan rise
Fretting with troublous ecstasy
All else to nought.
So pensively
Down the hill-side he slipped, and saw
All folk unto the homestead draw,
And noted how a homeman there
Turned round unto the hillside bare
Whereas amid the sun he went,
Then side-long to his fellow bent
And pointed, and all turned abou
And stood a while, as if in doubt
Whether for him they should not stay,
Yet went at last upon their way.
Now thereat somewhat did he smile
And walked the slower for a while
As though with something of a care
To meet outside no loiterer
Then went on at a swifter pace:
And all things with familiar face
Gazed on him; till again the shame
Of not being of them o'er him came.

Most fair to peaceful heart was all;
Windless the ripe fruit down did fall,
The shadows of the large grey leaves
Lay grey upon the oaten sheaves
By the garth-wall as he passed by;
The startled ousel-cock did cry,
As from the yew-tree by the gate
He flew; the speckled hen did wait
With outstretched neck his coming in,
The March-hatched cockerel gaunt and thin
Crowed shrilly, while his elder thrust
His stiff wing-feathers in the dust
That grew aweary of the sun:
The old and one-eyed cart-horse dun,
The middenstead went hobbling round
Blowing the light straw from the ground.
With curious eyes the drake peered in
O'er the barn's dusk, where dust and din
Were ceasing now a little space.

There for a while with anxious face,
Yet smiling therewithal, John stood,
Then toward the porch of carven wood
He turned, and hearkened to the hum
Of mingled speech that thence did come
Through the dumb clatter of the hall,
Lest any word perchance might fall
Upon his ears to tell of aught
That change or death thereto had brought;
And, listening so, deemed he could hear
His father's voice, but nothing clear,
And then a pause, and then again
The mingled speech of maids and men.
Again some word remembered
From old days half aloud he said,
And pulled his hood about his brow,
And went with doubtful steps and slow
Unto the door, and took the horn,
Which his own hand did once adorn,
And blew a loud, clear blast thereon,
And pushed the door; then like a sun
New come to a dull world he stood,
Gleaming with gold from shoes to hood,
In the dusk doorway of the place
Whence toward him now turned every face.
From 'neath his hood he gazed around,
And soothly there few gaps he found;
Amidmost of the upper board
His brethren sat, Thorolf and Thord;
He saw his sire, half risen up
From the high-seat, a silver cup
In his brown hand; and by his side

His mother o'er her barm-cloth wide
Gazed forward somewhat timidly
The new-comer's bright weed to see.
Small change in these indeed, John thought,
By lapse of days had yet been wrought;
And for the rest, but one or two
There were, he deemed, of faces new.
There open-eyed, beer-can in hand,
And staring did the damsels stand
As he had known them; there he saw
Haldor the Icelander half draw
His heavy short-sword forth, as he
The gleam of gold and steel did see
Flash suddenly across the door—
An old man skilled in ancient lore,
And John's own foster-sire withal.

But on one face did John's eyes fall
He needs must note—a woman leaned
O'er Thord, and though her face was screened
By his wide bush of light red hair
Yet might he see that she was fair,
And deemed his brother newly wed.

And now, as thoughts ran through his head
About the tale that he should tell,
His sire, as one who knew right well
What manners unto men were meet,
Rose up and cried from out his seat:

"Knight, or fair lord, whatso thou be'st,
If thou mayst share a bonder's feast,
Sit by me, eat and drink thy fill;
For this my hall is open still
To peaceful men of all degree."

Strange seemed his own voice there to be
To John, as he in feigned speech said:
"Thanks have thou for thy goodlihead
And welcome, goodman; certainly
Hungry and weary-foot am I,
And fain of rest, and strange withal
To this your land, for it did fall,
That e'en now as I chanced to ride
I lighted by a waterside
To slake my thirst; and just as I
Was drinking therefrom eagerly,
A blue-winged jay, new-hatched in spring,
Must needs start forth and fall to sing
His villain plain-song o'er my head;
And like a ghost come from the dead
Was that unto my horse, I trow,
Who swerved and went off quick enow,
To leave me as a gangrel churl."

"Thou seemest liker to an Earl,"
His father said; "but come to meat,
To hungry men are bannocks sweet."

So by his father's side he sat
And of that homely cheer he ate,
Remembered well; and oft he sighed
To think how far away and wide
The years had set him from all this,
And how that all-devouring bliss
Had made the simple life of old
As a dull tale too often told.
But as he sat thereby, full oft
The goodwife's eyes waxed sad and soft,
Beholding him; she muttered low:

"Alas! fair lips, I ought to know,
Like unto lips that once hung here;
Eyes like to eyes that once were dear
When all that body I could hold,
And flaxen-white was hair of gold."

So muttered she, but said not aught
Aloud. Now the fair damsel brought
Mead to the gay-clad man, and he
Beheld her beauty thoughtfully,
As she shook back her cloud of hair,
And swung aside her figure fair,
And clasped the cup with fingers slim,
And poured and reached it forth to him;
Then his heart changed again with shame
As cold cup and warm fingers came
Into his hand, the while his eyes
A look in hers must needs surprise
That made him flush, and she—the red
O'er face and neck and bosom spread
And her hand trembled; Thord the while
Gazed on her with a foolish smile
Across his wide face. So went by
The hour of that festivity,
And then the boards were set aside;
But the host prayed his guest to bide
As long as he had will thereto,
And therewith to the field did go
With sons and homemen, leaving John
Among the women-folk alone.

So these being set to rock and wool,
John sat him down upon a stool
And 'gan to ponder dreamily,
'Mid longings, on the days gone by,
And many a glance did Thord's wife steal
Upon him as she plied the reel
Not noted much, though once or twice
His pensive eyes did meet her eyes,
And troubled and abashed thereat
He reddened. But the goodwife sat
Meanwhile, and ever span and span
With steady fingers, and yet wan
Her face was grown; her mouth and eyes
Seemed troubled with deep memories.

At last to Thord's wife did she turn
And said:
"If honey we would earn
Against Yule-tide, the weaving-room
Must hear the clatter of the loom
Ere the long web is fully done;
So, Thorgerd, thither get thee gone;
Thou, Asa, to the cloth-room go
And wait me there; and for you two,
Mary and Kirstin, best were ye
Sitting in Thorgerd's company,
To give her help with reel and thread
And shuttle."
Therewith, as she said,
So did they, and went, one and all;
But in the doorway of the hall
Did Thorgerd for a moment stand,
Holding her gownskirt in her hand,
Her body swaying daintily,
Nor cared to hold aback a sigh.
Nor son, nor mother noted her,
A little time the twain sat there
Nor spake, though twice the goodwife strove,
But fear forbade her tongue to move;
Nor had he noted much forsooth
Midst his own longing and self-ruth,
Her looks of loving and of doubt.
So from the hall did she pass out,
And left him there alone, and soon,
So longing dealt that afternoon
That, fallen to musing pensively,
In the lone hall, now scarce might he
Know if his heart were glad or sad;
And tunes within his head he had
Of ancient songs learnt long ago,
Remembered well through bliss and woe,
And now withal a lovesome stave
He murmured to a measure grave,
Scarce thinking of its sense the while.
But as he sat there, with a smile
Came handmaid Asa back, who bare
Heaped in her arms embroidered gear,
Which by his feet did she let fall,
Then gat her gone from out the hall;
John, startled, ceased awhile his drone
To gaze upon the gear cast down,
And saw a dark blue cloak and hood
Wrought with strange needlework and rude
That showed the sun and stars and moon;
Then, gazing, John remembered soon
How for Yule sport four years agone
That selfsame raiment he did on,
And thinking on that bygone mirth
His own rich cloak he cast to earth,
And did on him half wittingly
That long-forgotten bravery;
And though the sun was warm that day
He hugged himself in his old way
Within the warmth of fold on fold
As though he came from out the cold,
And 'gan the hall to pace about;
And at the last must needs break out
Into a song remembered well,
That of the Christmas joy did tell.

Outlanders, whence come ye last?
The snow in the street and the wind on the door.
Through what green seas and great have ye passed?
Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.

From far away, O masters mine,
The snow in the street and the wind on the door.
We come to bear you goodly wine,
Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.

From far away we come to you,
The snow in the street and the wind on the door.
To tell of great tidings strange and true.
Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.

News, news of the Trinity,
The snow in the street and the wind on the door.
And Mary and Joseph from over the sea!
Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.

For as we wandered far and wide,
The snow in the street and the wind on the door.
What hap do ye deem there should us betide!
Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.

Under a bent when the night was deep,
The snow in the street and the wind on the door.
There lay three shepherds tending their sheep.
Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.

"O ye shepherds, what have ye seen,
The snow in the street and the wind on the door.
To slay your sorrow, and heal your teen?"
Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.

"In an ox-stall this night we saw,
The snow in the street and the wind on the door.
A babe and a maid without a flaw.
Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.

"There was an old man there beside,
The snow in the street and the wind on the door.
His hair was white and his hood was wide.
Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.

"And as we gazed this thing upon,
The snow in the street and the wind on the door.
Those twain knelt down to the Little One.
Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.

"And a marvellous song we straight did hear,
The snow in the street and the wind on the door.
That slew our sorrow and healed our care."
Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.

News of a fair and a marvellous thing,
The snow in the street and the wind on the door.
Nowell, nowell, nowell, we sing!
Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.

So sang he, and in pensive wise
He sighed, but lifting up his eyes
Beheld his mother standing nigh,
Looking upon him pitifully.
He ran to her, for now he knew
Her yearning love, round her he threw
Strong arms, and cried out:
"So it is,
O mother, that some days of bliss
I still may give thee; yet since I
To thee at least will never lie
Of what I am, and what I hope,
And with what ill things I must cope,
Sit thou aside, and look not strange
When of my glory and great change
I shall tell even such a tale
As best for all things may avail.
And if thou wouldst know verily
Meanwhile, how matters fare with me,
This thing of all things may I tell;
I have been happy and fared well,
But now with blind eyes must await
Some unseen, half-guessed turn of fate,
Before the dropping of the scale
Shall make an ending to the tale,
Or blithe or sad: think not meanwhile
That fear my heart shall now beguile
Of all the joy I have in thee."

She wept about him tenderly
A long while, ere she might say aught;
Then she drew back, and some strange thought
Stirred in her heart belike, for she
Gazed at his splendour timidly,
(For the rude cloak to earth was cast;)
And whispered trembling at the last.

"Fair art thou come again, sweet son,
And sure a long way hast thou gone,
I durst not ask thee where: but this
I ask thee by the first sweet kiss,
Wherewith I kissed thy new-born face
Long since within the groaning-place—
If thou hast been so far, that thou
Canst tell to me—grown old, son, now,
Through weary life, unsatisfied
Deiress, and lingering hope untried—
If thou canst tell me of thy ruth,
What thing there is of lies or truth,
In what the new faith saith of those
Great glories of the heavenly close,
And how that poor folk twinned on earth
Shall meet therein in joy and mirth?"

Smiling with pity and surprise,
He looked into her wistful eyes,
And kissed her brow therewith, and said:

"Nought know I, mother, of the dead,
More than thou dost—let be—we live
This day at least, great joy to give
Each unto other: but the tale
Must come from thee about the dale,
And what has happed therein, since I
That summer eve went off to try
What thing by folly might be wrought
When strength and wisdom came to nought."

She smiled amidst her tears, and there
She told him all he fain would hear,
And happily they talked till eve,
When the men-folk the field did leave
And gat them to the hall, and then
Was great rejoicing of all men
Within a while, for, cloak and hood
Thrown off, in glittering gear John stood
And named himself; yet scarcely now
His father durst his arms to throw
Round his son's neck, remembering
How he had thought him such a thing
As scarce was meet his bread to win.
Small thought had John of that old sin,
Yea, scarce had heart to think of aught,
But when again he should be brought
Face unto face with love; and slow
The leaden minutes lingered now;
Nor could he fail to hope that he
That very hour her face would see;
Needs must he hope that his strong love,
So sore the heart in her must move,
That she no more might bear his pain.

That very hour, he thought again—
That very hour; woe worth the while,
Why should his heart not feel her smile
Now, now?—O weary time, O life,
Consumed in endless, useless strife,
To wash from out the hopeless clay
Of heavy day and heavy day
Some specks of golden love, to keep
Our hearts from madness ere we sleep!

Good welcome, if of clownish kind,
Did John from both his brethren find,

And from the homemen; Thorgerd seemed
As somewhat less of him she deemed
Than heretofore, and smiled, as she
Put up her fair cheek daintily
To take his kiss. So went the night
Midst mirth and manifold delight,
Till John at last was left alone
To think upon the strange day gone,
Scarce knowing yet, if nearer drew
His bliss because it was gone through.

Now in such wise, day passed by day,
Till heavier on him longing lay,
As still less strange it was to wake
And no kind kiss of welcome take,
And welcome with no loving kiss,
Kind eyes to a new day of bliss;
And as the days passed o'er his head
Sometimes he needs must wake in dread,
That all the welfare, that did seem
To be his life, was but a dream,
Or all at least slipped swiftly by
Into a wretched memory.
Yet would hope leave him not, yea, whiles
Wrapped round about by her strange guiles
All seemed to go right well, and oft
Would memory grow so sweet and soft,
That scarce the thing it imaged, had
More might in it to make him glad.

Well may ye deem that midst all this
His brooding face would cloud the bliss
Of many a boisterous night; his sire
Would mutter, "He has clomb up higher,
But still is moonstruck as before;"
His brethren ill his silence bore,
Yet feared him; such a tale he told
That in that mead he did behold
Strange outland people come that morn,
By whom afar he had been borne
Into a fair land, where, he said,
Thriving, the king's child did he wed
Within a while; "Now, when once more
Their keels shall leave their noble shore,
At Norway will they touch, and then
Back go I with those goodly men,
Now I have seen my land and kin."

Fair Thorgerd ever sought to win
Kind looks of him, and many a day
She from the hall would go away
To rage within some secret place,
That all the sweetness of her face,
Her lingering fingers, her soft word,
'Twixt red half-opened lips scarce heard,
Had bought for her so little ruth;
Although there seemed some times, in sooth,
When John, grown weary of the strife
Within him between dreams and life,
Must think it not so over ill
To watch her hand the shuttle fill,
While on her cheek the red and white
Flickered and changed with new delight,
And hope of being a thing to move
That dreamy man to earthly love.

So autumn fell to winter-tide,
And ever there did John abide,
'Mid hope deferred and longing fierce,
That strove the heavy veil to pierce;
And howso strong his love might be,
Yet were there tides of misery,
When, in his helpless, hopeless rage,
He felt himself as in a cage
Shown to the gaping world; again
Would heavy languor dull his pain,
And make it possible to live,
And wait to see if fate would give
Some pleasure yet ere all was done.

Meantime, with every setting sun,
Unto the meadow as she bade
He went, and often, half afraid,
Half hopeful, did he watch the night
Suck slowly in the lingering light;
But of the homefolk, though all knew
Whither his feet at evening drew,
Yet now so great a man he was,
None asked him why he needs must pass
Each eve along the self-same way,
Save Thorgerd, who would oft waylay
His feet returning, and would watch
Some gesture or some word to catch
From his unwariness; and whiles
Her tender looks and words and smiles
Would seem to move him now, and she
Laughed to herself delightedly;
And as the days grew heavier
To John, he oft would gaze on her,
At such times as she tripped along,
And wonder where would be the wrong
If he should tell her of his tale;
Withal he deemed her cheek grew pale,
As unto Yule-tide drew the days,
And oft into her eyes would gaze
In such kind wise, that she awhile
Forgot her foolishness and guile,
Surprised by sparks of inner love.

Yet nothing a long while did move
His mouth to fatal speech, until
When the snow lay on moor and hill
And it was Yule-day, he did go
'Twixt the high drift o'er beaten snow

Unto the meadow, as the day
Short, wind-bewildered, died away.
And so, being come unto the thorn
Where first that bitter love was born,
He gazed around, but nothing saw
Save endless waste of grey clouds draw
O'er the white waste, while cold and blind
The earth looked; e'en the north-west wind
Found there no long abiding-place,
But ever the low clouds did chase,
Nor let them weep their frozen tears.

Strange is it how the grieved heart bears
Long hours and days and months of woe,
As dull and leaden as they go,
And makes no sign, yea, and knows not
How great a burden it hath got
Upon it, till all suddenly
Some thought scarce heeded shall flit by,
That tears the veil as by it goes
With seeming careless hand, and shows
The shrinking soul that deep abyss
Of days to come all bare of bliss.
And now with John e'en so it fared.
He saw his woe and longing bared
Before his eyes, as slow and slow
The twilight crept across the snow,
Like to the dying out of hope;
And suddenly he needs must cope
With that in-rushing of despair
Long held aback, till all things there
Seemed grown his foes, his prison-wall;
And, whatso good things might befall
To others of the wide world, he
Was left alone with misery.
Why should he hold his peace or strive
Amid these men as man to live
Who recked not of him? Then he cried:

"Would God, would God, that I had died
Before the accursed name of Love
My miserable heart did move!
Why did I leave thee in such wise,
False heart, with lovesome, patient eyes,
And soul intent to do thy will?
And why, why must I love thee still,
And long for thee, and cast on thee
Blessings wrung out of misery,
That will not bless thee, if in sooth
On my wrecked heart thou hast no ruth?
O come, come, come to me, my love,
If aught my heart thy heart may move,
For I am wretched and alone,
With head grown wild, heart turned to stone,
Come, if there yet be truth in thee!"

He gazed about him timorously
While thus he spake, as though he thought
To see some sudden marvel wrought
In earth and heaven; some dreadful death,
Some sight, as when God threateneth
The world with speedy end; but still
Unchanged, o'er mead and wold and hill
Drave on the dull low twilight rack,
Till all light seemed the sky to lack,
And the snow-shrouded earth to gain
What it had lost.

"In vain, in vain!"
He cried, "and I was well bewrayed;
She wept o'er me when I was laid
Upon the grass beside her feet,
Because a pleasure somewhat sweet
She needs must lay aside, while I—
—What tears shall help my misery?"

Then back he turned in e'en such mood
As when one thing seems no more good
Than is another; and will seems
To move the body but by dreams
Of ancient life and energy.
But as he wandered listlessly
Midst the wind's howling, and the drift
Of light snow that its force did lift,
And gained at last the garth's great gate,
He started back, for there did wait
A grey form in the dull grey night,
Yea, and a woman's; strange affright,
Strange hope possessed him, and he strove
To cry aloud some word of love,
But his voice failed him; she came nigh
And drew up to him quietly,
Not speaking; when she reached his side
Her hand unto his hand did glide
And thrilled him with its soft warm touch.
He stammered:

"Have I loved too much,
Have I done wrong? I called thee, dear;
Speak, love, and take away my fear!"

A soft voice answered, "O speak not!
I cannot bear my joy, o'er hot
Waxeth my heart, when in such wise
Thou art changed to me—O thine eyes,
I see them through the darksome night
Gazing upon me! sweet delight!
How shall I deal with all my bliss?
So that the world know nought of this,
When scarce now I may breathe or stand
Holding thy lovesome clinging hand."

Now therewith Thorgerd's voice he knew,
And from her hand his hand he drew,
While o'er his heart there swept again
The bitter blast of doubting pain,
And scarce he knew who by his side
Was going, as aloud he cried:

"In vain I call; thou comest not,
And all our love is quite forgot;
What new world hast thou got to rule?
What mockeries mak'st thou of the fool
Who trusted thee? Alas, alas!
Whatever ill may come to pass
Still must I love thee."
Now by him
Went Thorgerd silent, every limb
Tingling with madness and desire;
Love lit within her such a fire
As e'en that eve in nowise cooled,
As of her sweet, fresh hope befooled
She strove to speak, and found no word
To tell wherewith her heart was stirred.
So on they went, she knowing nought
The bitterness of his ill thought,
He heeding not in any wise
The wretchedness of her surprise,
Until, thus far estranged, they came
To where the hall's bright light did flame
Over a space of trodden snow.
Faster a space then did she go,
But, as they drew anigh the door,
Stopped suddenly, and stood before
The musing, downcast man, and laid
A hand upon his breast, and said,
In a low smothered voice:
"Wait now,
And tell me straightly what didst thou
To call me love, and then to cry
Thy love came not? I am anigh,
What wouldst thou have, did I not move
Thy cold heart? am I not thy love?"

Then, trembling as those words she spoke,
She cast to earth her heavy cloak;
From head to foot clad daintily,
Meet for that merry tide was she;
A silver girdle clasped around
Her well-wrought loins, her fair hair crowned
With silver, and her gown enwrought
With flowers whereof that tide knows nought;
Nor needed she that rich attire
To set a young man's heart afire,
For she was delicately made
As is the lily; there she swayed,
Leaned forward to the strenuous wind
That her gay raiment intertwined
About her light limbs. Gazing there,
Bewildered with a strange despair,
John saw her beauty, yet in sooth
Something within him slew all ruth
If for a moment:
"Ah, what love,
What love," he cried, "my heart should move,
But mine own love, my worshipped sweet?
Would God that her belovéd feet
Would bless our threshold this same night!"

Then, even as a sudden light
Shows to some wretch the murderer's knife
Drawing anear his outworn life,
Knowledge rushed o'er him, and too late
Did he bethink him of the fate
That threatened, and, grown wild and blind,
He turned to meet the western wind
That hurried past him, thinking, "Now
At least the formless sky will show
Some sign of my undoing swift;
Surely the sightless rack will lift
To show some dreadful misery,
Some image of the summer sky
Defaced by the red lightning's sword."
So spake he, and the fierce wind roared
Amid the firs in sullen wise,
But nothing met his fearful eyes
Save the grey waste of night. Withal
He turned round slowly to the hall,
Trembling, yet doubtful of his heart,
Doubtful of love. But for her part
Thorgerd, half mad with love, had turned
And fled from him; a red spot burned
Amidst each smooth cheek, and her eyes
Afire with furious jealousies,
Followed him down the hall, as he
Went toward the daïs listlessly,
And the loud horns blew up to meat,
And restless were her fevered feet
Throughout the feast that now befell.

Now thereat men were served right well,
And most were merry, and the horn
Full oft from board to beard was borne;
But no mead brewed of mortal man
Could make John's face less wild and wan;
For a long while he trembled sore
Whene'er the west-wind shook the door
More than its wont; nor heeded he
The curse of Thorgerd's misery
Wild-gleaming from her eyes; and when
She fell to talk with the young men
With hapless, haggard merriment,
No pang throughout his heart there went:
For clear across it were there borne
Pictures of all the life forlorn
That should be, yea, his life he saw,
Unhelped and heavy-burdened, draw
Through the dull joyless years, until
The bitter measure they should fill,
And he, unloved, unsatisfied,
Unkissed, from foolish hope should hide
In some dark corner of death's house.

Yet, as the feast grew clamorous
About him, and the night went past,
The respite wrought on him at last,
And from its midst did he begin
A little rest from fear to win,
And in the feast he joined and seemed
No more as in their midst he dreamed.

So passed a space, till presently
As with a beaker raised on high
He stood, and called on some great name
Writ in the book of northern fame,
Across the wind there came a sound
As though afar a horn were wound,
A dreadful sound to him; the men
Sat hearkening, till it came again
Nigher and sharper now, and John,
Grown white, laid his left hand upon
His beating heart; and then once more
Loud rang the horn close by the door,
And men began in haste to take
Their weapons for their safety's sake;
But John, the cup in his right hand,
His left upon his heart, did stand,
And might not either move nor speak.

Then cried the goodman, "Not so weak
Are we, but these may well come in
Unmet with weapons; they shall win
All good things on this stormy night;
Go welcome them to our delight;
For on this merry tide of Yule
Shall Christ the Lord all matters rule."

Then opened they the door, and strong
The wild wind swept the hall along,
Driving the hangings here and there,
Making the torches ruddier,
Darkening the fires. But therewithal
An utter hush came o'er the hall,
And no man spake of bad or good;
For in the midst of them there stood
A white-clad woman, white as though
A piece of fair moonlitten snow
Had entered the red smoky hall.
Then sweet speech on their ears did fall
Thrilling all hearts through:
"Joy and peace
Be on this house, and all increase
Of all good things! and thou, my love,
I knew how sore desire must move
Thy longing heart, and I am come
To look upon thee in thine home:
Come to me, give me welcome here!"

He stepped adown, and shame and fear
Mixed with the joyful agony
Of love and longing, as anigh
He drew unto her loveliness.
A moment, and his arms did press
His own love to his heaving breast,
And for an instant of sweet rest
Midst clinging hands and trembling kiss
Did he forget all things but bliss;
And still she murmured:
"Now rejoice
That far away I heard thy voice
And came! rejoice this night at least,
And make good ending to the feast!"

Therewith from out his arms she drew,
Yet held his hand still; scarce he knew
Of where he was, and who were round,
And strange and flat his voice did sound
Unto himself, as now he spake:

"Kinsmen, see her, who for my sake
Has left her mighty state and home,
Fair beyond words, that she might come
With you a little to abide!
How say ye, are ye satisfied
Her sweet face in your midst to see?'

Therewith, though somewhat timidly,
Folk shouted; sooth, they deemed her such
As mortal man might scarcely touch
Or dare to love; with fear fulfilled,
With shame of their rough joyance chilled,
They sat, scarce moving: but to John
Some sweet familiar thing seemed won
Despite his fear, as down the hall
He led her: if his eyes did fall
On Thorgerd's face, how might he heed
The anguish of unholpen need,
That filled her heart with all despair,
As on the twain her eyes did glare?

Now softly to the fair high-seat
With trembling hand he led his sweet,
Who kissed the goodman and goodwife,
And wished them fair and happy life;
Then like the earth's and heaven's queen,
She sat there beauteous and serene,
Till, as men gazed upon her there,
Joy of her beauty slew their fear;
Hot grew their hearts now, as they turned
Eyes on her that with strange light burned;
And wild and eager grew the speech
Wherewith they praised her each to each,
As 'neath her eyes they sat.
If he
Who knew the full felicity
Of all they longed for, hushed at whiles,
Might answer not her healing smiles

With aught but sad imploring eyes,
When he bethought him in what wise
She there was come—yet none the less
Amid bewildered happiness
The time went by; until at last
Night waned, and slowly all folk passed
From out the hall, and the soft sleep
O'er all the marvelling house did creep,
Bearing to folk that night such dreams,
As showed, through wild things, very gleams
Of heaven and perfect love, to last
Till grey light o'er the world was cast.

But, midst the other folk, she too
His mazed and doubtful footsteps drew
Unto the chamber; when alone
They were, and his warm heart seemed one
With her and bliss, without a word
She gazed on him, and like a sword,
Cleaving the very heart atwain
That look was, laden with all pain,
All love and ruth that she might feel.

So through the dark the hours did steal
Slow toward the rising of the sun;
But long or ere the night was done
He slept within her arms, nor heard
The sobs wherewith her breast was stirred,
Nor felt the tears and kisses sweet
That round his set calm face did beat,
As round its dead mate beats a bird
With useless flutter no more heard:
Nor did he move when she unwound
The arms that clasped her breast around,
And, weeping sore, the gold ring drew
From off his hand: and nought he knew
When from the bed at last she slid,
And, with her body all unhid,
Stood gazing on him till a sigh
Burst from her heart; and wearily
From her sad tear-stained troubled face
She swept her hair back:

"O the days,
Thy weary days, love! Dream not then
Of named lands, and abodes of men!
Alas, alas, the loneliest
Of all such were a land of rest
When set against the land where I
Unhelped must note the hours go by!
Ah, that my hope thy dream might pierce!
That mid the dreadful grief and tears,
Which presently shall rend thine heart,
This word the cloud might draw apart—
My feet, lost Love, shall wander soon
East of the Sun, West of the Moon!
Tell not old tales, of love so strong,
That all the world with all its wrong
And heedlessness was weak to part
The loving heart from loving heart?"

Therewith she turned about, and now
She wept no more; her cheeks 'gan glow,
And her eyes glittered, and no more
Sorrow her kind mouth brooded o'er,
And strange, unearthly beauty shone
O'er all her face, whence ruth was gone,
Till the dim-litten place was glad
That in the midst thereof it had
Her loveliness grown dangerous;
Softly she gat her through the house
Where here and there a dying light
Shone on her wondrous limbs and white
As through the rough place dreamily
She moved: yet was the night wind high,
And its rude hand, as it did shake
Window and door, served but to make
The inner stillness yet more still.
The clouds were riven; o'er the hill
The white moon shone out, yet its light
Made the deep night so much more night,
That now it seemed as ne'er again
The sun would bless the eyes of men;
That all the world had fallen to death.

So on she passed; her odorous breath
Seen now amidst the moonlit hall,
Her unshod foot's light steady fall,
The waving of her gust-moved hair,
Well-nigh the lonely place might hear
Despite the rush and stir without,
As, slowly, yet all void of doubt
She raised the latchet of the door,
And let the wind and moonlight pour
Wild clamour and strange light therethrough.
She paused not; the wild west wind blew
Her hair straight out from her; her feet
The bitter, beaten snow did meet
And shrank not; slowly forth she passed
Nor backward any look she cast,
Nor gazed to right or left, but went
With eyes on the far sky intent
Into the howling, doubtful night,
Until at last her body white
And its black shadow on the snow,
No more the drift-edged way did know.

Again the thread snapped; Gregory lay
Awake; nor what had passed away
Of the short night could tell, till he
Through the tent's opening seemed to see
A change creep o'er the moonlit sky;
So there a short while did he lie

Striving to think what he had dreamed,
Till utterly awake he seemed;
And then, since no more on that night
He thought to sleep, and lost delight
Of the past dream, grown more than dim,
With causeless longing wearied him,
He rose and left the tent once more,
And passed down slowly toward the shore
Until the boat he came unto:
And there he set himself to do
What things were needed to the gear,
Until he saw the dawn draw near
Across the sea: then, e'en as one
Who through a marvellous land hath gone
In sleep, and knowing nought thereof
To tell, yet knows strange things did move
About his sightless journeying,
So felt he; and yet seemed to bring,
Now and again, some things anigh
Unto the wavering boundary
'Twixt sight and blindness, that awhile
Our troubled waking will beguile
When happy dreams have just gone by,
And left us without remedy
Within the unpitying hands of life.

At last, amid perplexing strife
With things half-seen, drowsy he grew
Once more, and ever slower drew
The tough brown lines from hand to hand,
Until he sank upon the sand
Beside the boat, and, staring out
O'er the grey sea, lost hope and doubt
In little while, nor noted now
The dawn's line wide and wider grow,
Nor waning of the shadow deep
The moon cast from the boat; till sleep
Had closed his eyes, and in the cold
Of the first dawn the ending told
Of that sweet tale. Yet so it was,
That the King's hall and feast did pass
Clean from his mind; and now it seemed
That of no tale-telling he dreamed,
But of his own life grown to be
A new and marvellous history.

Midst hope and fear and wretchedness,
And Love, that all things doth redress,
Adown the stream of fate he moved
As the carle's son, the well-beloved,
The fool of longing; in such wise
He dealt with his own miseries.

THE winter night was on the wane
When the poor wretch woke up again;
The lone strange sound of cock-crow moved
His heart to dream of his beloved
'Twixt sleep and waking, and he turned
A face with utmost love that yearned
And sighed, as his hot hand stole forth
To touch a body of more worth
To him than Heaven's unmeasured years;
Upon his face were undried tears
Left by some dream, and yet he smiled
To think of deep joy so beguiled
By sadness dreamed; his lips began
To speak a name unknown to man.
A little while in bliss he lay
And gathered thoughts of day on day
More joyful each than each, until
Sweet thankful love his soul did fill
With utter ecstasy of bliss,
And low he murmured:
"Kind she is
Beyond all kindness ever told!
Thou wilt not leave me more, a-cold
In the rough world; thou knowest how
My weak and clinging heart will grow
Unto the strength of thy great heart.
O surely no more shall we part,
And never canst thou hurt me more
Till all the world and time is o'er!"

The moonlight waned, on drew the morn,
The lessened west wind moaned forlorn
In the garth nooks; the eaves dripped now
Beneath the thaw, the faint cock-crow
Through the dull dawn, and no sound more
He heard. Awake, and yearning sore,
He turned about and cried:
"Wake, wake!
Day cometh, and my heart doth ache
To think how sleep still takes from me
Some minutes of felicity,
From me and thee, my love, my sweet!
O think of Death's forgotten feet,
That somewhere surely drawn anigh,
And let no minute more pass by
With our lips parted each from each!"

Wildly the ending of his speech
Rang from his lips, all strange, as though
The thought once thought needs thence must go
In words, though all the world were changed.
Wildly his opened eyes now ranged
The twilight chamber void of her,
And through his heart shot such a fear
As words may tell not—nay indeed
No fear—for now he knew the meed
Of his fool's word, and for a while
No hope was left that might beguile
His misery and his loneliness;
No eager sight, born of distress,
Might pierce the cloud that o'er him spread.

Such wild thoughts filled his 'wildered head,
As once or twice may men endure
Yet live; for the earth seemed not sure,
Or the air fleeting; fire burned not,
Nor water moved; the snow was hot,
The dark hid nought; the coming day
No longer sober seemed and grey,
But full of flashing light and blue.
Yet all things round him well he knew;
More real they seemed than e'er before;
They would not change, nor would pass o'er
One instant of his agony.
It was as he had seen time die,
And good turn evil 'neath his eyes,
And God live to forge miseries
For him alone, for him alone;
For all the world beside seemed gone.

A short while, risen in his bed,
He hung his wretched brooding head
Above the place her limbs had warmed,
And shrieked not, though strange curses swarmed
About his heart, and wild and fierce
Strove hard his dead despair to pierce,
And might not: nought his heart might ease
Or for a moment gain him peace.
Yet in that time of utter ill,
Some reflex of the guiding will
That moved his limbs in happier days
Still wrought in him; round did he gaze
With set eyes, and arose withal;
And e'en therewith a thought did fall
Upon him that some succour brought,
"How can I meet their eyes?" he thought,
"How can I bear to hear again
The voices of the sons of men?"

And, nigh unwitting, at that word,
Hearkening the while if any stirred,
He clad himself and gazed around
The place once more, and on the ground
There lay her raiment: then he turned
His head away, for wild-fire burned
Within it, and he strove to speak;
But, lest his wretched heart should break
And torment end on that first day
A new pain did his pain allay,
And bitter tears and wailing came
To dull the fierceness of the flame
That so consumed him; and withal
Desire of wandering forth 'gan fall
Upon him, though he knew not where
In all the world to seek for her.

So, ere his burning tears were spent,
Through the unwakened hall he went,
And kissed the threshold of the door
Her well-loved feet had touched before,
Yet saw no signs upon the snow
Of those departing feet to show.
Cold blew the wind upon his face,
As now he left behind the place
Where he was born, nor turned again
To look farewell; for nought and vain
Seemed all things but his misery,
That now had grown his life to be,
Not to be given away for aught
That earth might hold; nor had he thought
That anything his lot could change,
That anything could more be strange,
Lovesome or fearful to his heart,
Or in his life have any part.

So forth he went from that abode,
Along a well-known, oft-trod road,
He knew not why or where, until
Clean hidden by a bare waste hill,
Were the snow-covered roofs wherein
His outward life did first begin.
Then as he wandered on forlorn,
From out his unrest was there born
Some faint half-memory, that did seem
To be the remnant of a dream;
Some image to his mind there clung,
Some speech upon his lips yet hung
He might not utter.

And now he
Had gone so long that the wide sea
He saw afar, when the dull day
Toward eve again had passed away,
Amidst the utter solitude
Of his time-slaying weary mood.
But weak and way-worn was he now,
Though greater did his longing grow
To wander ever on and on,
Until the unknown rest were won.
And when he gazed from the hill-side,
And saw the great sea spreading wide,
All black and empty from the shore,
So sharp a longing then came o'er
His dull despair, such wild desire,
That stung, as when a coal of fire
Is laid upon an aching wound,
He cast himself upon the ground,
And in the cold snow writhed and wailed,
While over him the sea-mew sailed,
Not silent, and the wind wailed too;
As though his bitter grief they knew,
And mocked him.

Yet or fell the night
He rose, and on the waste of white
Stood a black speck, then went until
The black night mingled sea and hill
And hurrying rack in nothingness.

Yet, kept alive by his distress,
He fainted not, nor went astray,
For as in dreams he knew the way
At last, and whitherward he went,
Since round the heart of strong intent
His woe was wrapped.
So o'er the down
He went, until a haven-town
Shone like a patch of stars on earth,
And something like a hope had birth
Within him, and somewhat he knew
His will, now that his body grew
Well-nigh too weak to bear him on.
Yet to the town at last he won,
So heartened now unto the task
That he for food and rest might ask;
And, since no lack of wealth he had,
Soon did he make a goodman glad
With gift of gold, and, all outworn,
Forgot his grief, and life forlorn
In long deep sleep most like to death.

Now at that town, my story saith,
Long must he bide, for so it was
That then no good ship well might pass
From land to land; for winter-tide
Still made the narrow seas full wide.
Each morn did John wake there, to gaze
With dead eyes on the waste of days,
Each eve he laid him down to sleep,
Much marvelling what his life did keep
From passing: still the memory
Of some faint, dreamlike thing gone by
Perplexed his heart, and still he strove,
Amid the anguish of his love,
To speak that half-remembered word,
Amidst a dream, belike, once heard.

This helped him through his dull-eyed woe,
That the time passed, and he should go
To other lands ere many days,
Seeming to seek for that lost face.

At last the day desired came
When o'er the land the Spring did flame
With love and flowers; and on an eve
John's good ship did the haven leave,
And pale he stood upon the prow,
And to the weary place, left now
Behind with all its patience dead,
No more had will to turn his head,
But thinking of the future still,
Amid the shipman's tangled skill,
Stood looking toward the flaming West,
With eyes made strange by love's unrest.

Upon the deck that night he lay,
And nought he slept until the day
Began to dawn, and woke again
In short space, feeling little pain,
And with his pale lips murmuring
Some word half-dreamed, some fleeting thing.
Then on his arm he rose, and saw
The waste of waters seem to draw
Unto him as the black prow clave
With steady heart green wave on wave;
None save the watch were on the deck,
Who, sleepy-eyed, no whit did reck
Of him and all his woe and love,
But 'twixt the bulwarks slow did move,
With little purpose, as it seemed;
The helmsman steered as though he dreamed
Of seafolk's marvels vaguely told
By firesides in the days of old;
The light wind waxed and waned; the ship
Still through the babbling waves did slip
As though their talk she hearkened to:
And 'midst it all John scarcely knew
Whether he lived still, or was dead:
Well-nigh it came into his head,
That he by ghosts of men was borne
From out his wasted life forlorn
O'er a strange sea to some strange place
Of unknown punishment or grace.
Skyward he looked, and o'er the mast
He saw the moon with all light past
From out of her, and as he gazed
The great sun o'er the green sea blazed,
And smote his head with sudden light.

Then in his heart the flame burned bright
That long had smouldered there, he cried:
"Ah, woe betide, ah, woe betide,
East of the Sun, West of the Moon!
A land that no man findeth soon,
The grave of greedy love that cries
To all folk of its agonies:
The prison of untrustful love,
That thinketh a light word can move
The heart of kindness, deep and wise.
—O love, love, would thy once-kissed eyes
Were glad to-day, that thy sweet smile
Forgat a wretch so base and vile,
That he but lived to make thee sad,
To weep the days that once were glad!'

But now the dreamlike sight that wrapped
His soul all suddenly was snapped.
He heard the watch cry out their cry,
The helmsman answered cheerily,
And mid the homely noise of these
Freshened awhile the morning breeze,
The ship leaned o'er the highway green,
That led to England's meads unseen.

At Dunwich, in the east country,
John landed from the weary sea,

Not recking where on earth he was;
But quickly therefrom did he pass,
Driven by growing hope; that word
In some old dream belike half heard,
East of the Sun, West of the Moon,
Seemed unto him a heaven-sent boon,
Yet made the merry world around
A dreary cage, a narrow round
Of dreamlike pain, a hollow place,
Filled with a blind and dying race.

That town and country-side, indeed,
Seemed all the less to help his need,
Whereas for common homely things
That well he knew, with Easterlings
And his own country-folk they dealt,
And scarce knew aught of what folk dwelt
Southward beyond the narrow seas;
So giving few farewells to these,
Towards London did he take his way,
And, journeying on, at hostels lay
Benights, or whiles at abbeys fair;
And as his hope grew, would he dare,
In manner of a tale, to tell
In what wise woe upon him fell;
And most men praised the tale enow,
And said no minstrel-wight might show
A merrier tale to feasting hall.
And so at last it did befall
That at a holy house he lay,
A noble house, forsooth, to-day
Men call St. Alban's; there he told
Once more, as a thing known of old,
The story of his hapless love:
Such passion there his tongue did move.
That in that abbey's guest-chamber
It was a better thing to hear
Than many a history nobly writ,
And much were all folk moved by it.
But when his speech was fully done,
From the board's end there rose up one,
A little dry old monk, right wise
Of semblance, with small glittering eyes,
Who came to John, and said:

"Thy tale,
Fair son, shall much my need avail,
For I have many such-like things
Writ out for sport of lords and kings.
Bide thou with us to-morn, I pray,
And hearken some for half a day;
For certes shall their memory
Help thee to pass the dull days by,
When thou growest old."

Wide-eyed John stared,
For scarce the old man's speech he heard,
Or any speech of men, for still
One thought his whole sad heart did fill.
Howbeit constrained, he knew not why,
He heard full many a history
Like to his own next morn, and went
Yet more upon his love intent;
Yet more the world seemed nought but this,
Longing for bliss and losing bliss.
And yet, of those fresh tales withal
Some endings on his heart did fall
As scarcely new; he 'gan to make
Tales to himself, how for his sake
She wept and waited; how some way
To Love fulfilled yet open lay;
The grey morn often would beguile
With dreams his sad lips to a smile,
While still his shut eyes did behold
Once more her sweetness manifold;
And if the waking from delight
Unto the real day void and white,
Were well-nigh more than man could bear,
Yet his own sad voice would he hear
Muttering as o'erword to the tune,
East of the Sun, West of the Moon.

Now come to London at the last,
Among the chapmen there he passed,
And many a tale of them he had
Concerning outlands good and bad
That they had journeyed through, but still
He heard none speak for good or ill
Of any way unto the place
Whereto for him still led all ways.
But his hope lived, nor might his heart
In any life of man have part,
And forth he wandered once again
As merchant among chaffering men,
And strange he seemed amongst them all;
His face changed not, whate'er might fall
Of good or ill; he won, he lost,
He gave, as counting not the cost;
Fell sick, grew well, and heeded nought
What the days took or what they brought;
Nowhere he strove great deeds to do,
Scarce spoke he save when spoken to;
Hither and thither still he went
As the winds blow, never content,
Never complaining; resting nought,
And yet scarce asking what he sought.
A strange waif in the tide of life,
With nought he seemed to be at strife,
To nothing earthly to belong.
Still burned his longing bright and strong,
As when upon that bitter morn
He hung with his white face forlorn,
Over the bed yet scarcely cold,
That erst her loveliness did hold.

So chasing dreams, so dreamlike chased,
Through lapse of years his life did waste;

His body changed, and old he grew
Before his time: his face none knew,
When, on a time, from journeyings vain
In southlands, wandering back again,
He heard his father welcome call
Across the smoke-wreaths of his hall.
O lonely heart! the yearning shame
That erst, when back thereto he came,
He felt at being so all alone
Among his own folk, was clean gone;
No lingering kindness of old days
Clung now to that familiar place;
With unmoved mouth he wandered there,
And saw his mother's empty chair,
For she was dead: with unchanged eyes
Thorgerd he saw from spinning rise,
Fair still and young, though he was old.
His father's face he did behold
With no faint smile of memory,
No pang for wasted youth gone by;
Betwixt his brethren twain he sat,
And heard them talk of this and that
Mid stories of a bygone day,
Scarce thinking how they used to play
Fair children once, and innocent,
With the next minute well content.

No goodwill from his kith and kin,
And things kind once, he now might win
From out the well-loved wasting fire
Of unfulfilled scarce-touched desire.
One place was as another place,
Haunted by memories of one face,
Vocal with one remembered voice,
Sad with one time's swift fleeting joys.
Yet as he passed the time-worn door
The last time, said farewell once more,
Scarce mid his outward calm could he
Stay quivering lip and trembling knee.
That on the threshold longed to lie,
Where surely had her feet gone by.

Through what wild lands he wandered wide,
Amongst what folk he did abide
Thereafter, nought my story saith.
Suffice it, that no outbraved death
Might end him; no chain of delay
His feet from his wild wanderings stay;
That every help he strove to gain
From wise or fools was still but vain;
Until, my story saith, at last
The second time in ship he passed
The wild waves of the Indian Sea,
And with a chaffering company
Long time abode, and ever heard
And saw great marvels, but no word,
No sight of what alone might give
A heart unto the dead-alive.

At last from the strange city there
He set sail in a dromond fair,
With chapmen for his fellows, bound
To such a land, that there the ground
Bears gems and gold, but nourisheth
Little besides save fear and death.
So long they sailed, that at the last
The skipper's face grew overcast,
And the stout chapmen 'gan to fear,
Because no signs of land drew near,
And all the days were fully done
When with fair wind they should have won
Unto the shore for which they made;
But of no death was John afraid
While o'er some space as yet untried
He bore his love unsatisfied;
With hate they eyed his calm face now,
For greater still their fear did grow.

Anigh the prow one eve he stood,
And something new so stirred his blood
With hope, that he at last might say,
A thing unsaid for many a day,
That he was happy; round about
The shipmen stood, and gazed in doubt
Upon a long grey bank of cloud
The eastern sky-line that did shroud.
He saw it not; grown soft with rest
His face was turned unto the west;
The low sun lit his golden hair
Changed now with years of toil and care,
The light wind stirred it as the prow
The babbling ripple soft did throw
From its black shining side; the sail
Flapped o'erhead as the wind did fail
Fitful that eve; the western sky
Was bright and clear as night drew nigh
Beyond all words to tell; at last
He shivered; to the tall white mast
He raised his eyes just as the sun
Blazed at his lowest: day was done,
But yet night lingered, as o'erhead,
With a new-kindled hope and dread,
The thin-curved moon, all white and cold,
'Twixt day and night did he behold.

No need now of that word to think,
Or where he heard it; he did shrink
Back midst his fellows, for he strove
This first time to forget his love
Lest hope should slay him; therewith now
He heard the shipmen speaking low
With anxious puckered brows, and saw
The merchants each to other draw
As men who feared to be alone;
And knew that a fresh fear had grown
Beside their old fear; nathless nought

To such things might he turn his thought.
All watched that night but he, who slept
While lovesome visions o'er him crept,
Making night happy with the sight
Of kind hands, and soft eyes and bright.
At last within a flowery mead
He seemed to be, clad in such weed
As fellows of the angels wear:
Alone a while he wandered there
Right glad at heart, until at last
By a fair-blossomed brake he passed,
And o'er his shoulder gazed, as he
Went by it; and lo, suddenly,
The odorous boughs were thrust apart,
And with all heaven within his heart
He turned, and saw his love, his sweet,
Clad in green raiment to the feet,
Her feet upon the blossoms bare,
A rose-wreath round her golden hair;
Her arms reached out to him, her mouth
Trembling to quench his life-long drouth,
Yet smiling 'neath her deep kind eyes
Upon his trembling glad surprise.
But when he would have gone to her
Him seemed a cry of deadly fear
Rang through the fair and lonely close,
A cold thick mist betwixt them rose,
And then all sight from him did pass,
And darkness a long while there was.

Then all at once he woke up, cast
With mighty force against the mast,
Whereto with desperate hands he clung
Unwitting, while the storm-wind sung
Its song of death about his ears.
But he, though grief had long slain fears,
Shouted midst clash of wind and sea,
Unheard shrieks, unseen misery
Of the black night:
"All come to nought
Yestreen I deemed that rest was brought
Anigh me, and I thought I knew
That toward my Love at last I drew.
The loveless rest comes, all deceit
Death treads to nothing with his feet!
O idle Maker of the world,
Art thou content to see me hurled
To nought, from longing and from tears,
When thou through all these weary years
With love my helpless soul hast bound,
And fed me in that narrow round
With no delight thy fair world knows?
Come close, my love, come close, come close,
Why wilt thou let me die alone?"

Howso he deemed his days were done,
Yet there still clung he desperately,
Mid wash of the in-rushing sea,
Mid the storm's night, for no least whit
Might he see through the rage of it,
Nor know which unseen hill of wave
The rash frail wooden toy would stave,
Or if another man did cling
Unto the hopeless shivering thing;
Yea, or if day had dawned, and light
High up, serene, now mocked the night
Of waves and winds. How long he drave
From windless trough to wind-sheared wave,
No whit he knew, although it seemed
So long, that all before was dreamed,
That there was neither heaven nor earth
Before that turmoil had its birth.

And yet at last, as on and on
He swept, and still death was not won;
A pleasure in his heart 'gan rise;
Love blossomed fresh mid fantasies,
Mid dreams born of the overthrow
Of sense and sight; he did not know
If still he lived, yet wrong and pain
Were words, that hindered not the gain,
Of sweet peace, whatso wild unrest
Were round about; and all the best
Seemed won, nor was one day of bliss
Forgotten; all was once more his,
That while agone he deemed so lost.
How long in sooth the ship was tost
From hill to hill of unseen sea
The tale tells not; but suddenly,
Amid the sweetest dream of all,
A long way down John seemed to fall,
Losing all sense of sight and sound;
Then brake a sudden light around,
Wherethrough he none the less saw nought,
And as it waned, waned sense and thought,
The peace of dull unconsciousness
His wild torn heart at last did bless.

He woke again upon the sand
Of a wide bay's curved shell-strewn strand,
And long belike had he lain there;
For morn it was, and fresh and fair,
And no least sign was on the sea
Of storm or wrack, but peacefully
On the low strand its last wave broke.

Scarce might John dream when thus he woke
Of what had happed or where he was;
Soft thoughts of bygone days did pass
Across his mind at first, and when
His later memory came again,
It was but with great toil that he
Could think about his misery
And all his latter wretched years;

And if the thought to unused tears
Did move him now, yet none the less
A strange content and happiness
Wrapped him around.
So to his feet
He rose now, and most fresh and sweet
The air was round him, and the sun
As of the time when morn begun
In early summer of the north,
Maketh the world seem wondrous worth,
And death and pain awhile doth hide.
He gazed across the ocean wide
With puzzled look; then up and down
Sought curiously the sea-sand brown
And at the last 'gan marvel how
No sign the smooth sea-strand might show
Of his lost ship and company;
Then closer to that summer sea
He went, and surely now it seemed
That he of India had but dreamed,
Because the sand beneath his feet
Washed smooth and flat by the sea's beat,
Or wrinkled by the ripple low,
Such shells and creeping things did show
As in the northland well he knew,
And round about o'erhead there flew
Such sea-fowl as in days of old,
Their unknown tales unto him told.
He gave a deep sigh, yet his heart
From that new bliss would nowise part,
Or battle with its strange content;
And no more midst his wonderment,
Rather for more of pain, he yearned,
Than any rest save one: he turned
From the green sea his dreamy eyes,
And saw soft slopes and lowly, rise
Green and unburnt from the smooth strand,
And further in, the rising land,
Besprent with trees of no such clime
As he had known for weary time;
From slope and thicket then there grew
High grassy, treeless hillsides, blue
With the light haze of that fair tide.

A little while did he abide
Gazing upon that pleasant place,
Then o'er his shoulder turned his face
Seaward, yet once more 'gan to go
Unto the hills, and felt as though
He bade unto the weltering flood
A last farewell; and sweet and good
His life seemed grown, e'en when he said,
"It may be that my love is dead;
Or living, still more like that I
Shall see her not before I die;
Fool am I then to feel my feet
Drawn on some happiness to meet!"

So went his words, but e'en as erst
When most he felt forlorn and cursed,
The words of hope seemed words and air,
So now seemed all his words of care
Empty of meaning. Forth he went
Light-hearted, till his firm feet bent
The daisies of the flowery grass,
And swiftly onward did he pass
From slope to slope: the land was fair,
Yet saw he no house anywhere,
No hedge or garden-close or corn;
Nor heard he halloo there or horn,
To make the dappled deer afraid,
That here and there about him strayed
Scarce heeding him: no arms he bare,
His raiment that had once been fair,
Was sorely stained, and worn, and rent;
And thirst and hunger as he went
Pressed on him; till he came at last
To where a spreading fruit-tree cast
Its shadows round deliciously;
John stayed there, for that friendly tree
Had load of apples: so he ate
And found them sweet and delicate,
As ever monk in garden grew,
Though little care belike they knew.
But now, when he had had his fill
Thereof, there marvelling stood he still,
Because to one bough blossoms clung
As it were May, but ripe fruit hung
Upon the other: then he smiled,
As one by a strange dream beguiled;
Then slowly on the grass sank down,
For sorely sweet had longing grown
With gathering languor of the day.
But looking round, as there he lay,
Upon the flowers besprent about,
Still more was love confused with doubt
If still he lived:
"Red roses fair
To wreathe my love that wanders here,
Gold-hearted lilies for her hand!
And yet withal that she may stand
On something other folk think sweet,
March violets for her rosy feet;
The black-heart amorous poppy, fain
Death from her passing knee to gain,
Bows to the gilliflower there:
The fiery tulip stands to stare
Upon her perfect loveliness,
That 'gainst the corn-cockle will press
Its fainting leaves: further afield
The untended vine black fruit doth yield,
That bore long torment of the heat,
At last in bliss her lips to meet;
The wind-flowers wotting of the thing
Must gather round there in the Spring,

And live and die and live again,
That they might feel the joyous pain
At last, of lying crushed and rent
Beneath her feet, while well content
Above their soft leaves she doth sing.
What marvel, love, that everything
Which far apart the troubled year,
Midst toil and doubt, gives otherwhere,
Must gather in this land round thee,
Living and dying, still to see
A wonder God shall not make twice.
Come swiftly, love, because mine eyes
Grow dim with love; a little while
Shall hope my fainting heart beguile
To think me strong; yet while I know
That nought of strength is in me now,
Save wasting fire of love alone—
Come to me then, ere all is gone!
And let it not be all for nought
That ever one heart have I sought
Of all the world, and cast aside
All thought that any bliss might hide
In aught save in thy love; thy love
That even yet perchance might move
The Great God not all utterly
To slay me, casting my soul by
As void henceforth for evermore,
What love soever once it bore,
That nothing mortal satisfied!"

He sprang up, o'er the countryside
He gazed long, and down ran the tears,
At thought of all the pain of years,
When he beheld its emptiness;
Yet presently on did he press,
With longing grown not all a pain.

The higher slopes now did he gain,
Through flowers and blooming trees, until
He 'gan to breast a steeper hill,
And coming out of a close wood,
High up above the lowlands stood,
And far away beheld the sea
Guarding the sweet land patiently,
Then turning, clomb on, till the sun
Sank low adown and day was done,
Before the hill's top he might gain;
Then e'en his restlessness was fain
There to abide the next day's light.
So down he lay, and the short night
Went by in dreams of that past day
When in the hawthorn-brake he lay;
How many lifetimes now agone
That day seemed, when once more alone
In the dawn's shiver he awoke!
Nathless with sturdy heart he broke
Through the morn's hopelessness, and still
Pressed up the last steep of the hill,
Until together with the sun
Its grey and rugged brow he won.

Then down into the vale he gazed,
And held his breath, as if amazed
By all its wondrous loveliness;
For as the sun its depths did bless,
It lighted up from side to side,
A close-shut valley, nothing wide,
But ever full of all things fair.
A little way the hill was bare,
Then clung to it a deep green wood
That guarded many a fertile rood
Of terraced vine and slopes of wheat;
A white way wound about its feet,
Beset with heavy-fruited trees
And cleaving orchards through; midst these,
Each hemmed round with its flowery close,
The cottages and homesteads rose;
But the hill-side sprang suddenly
From level meadows that did lie
On either side a noble stream,
O'er which the morning haze did steam,
Made golden now; then rose again
The further hill-sides, bright with grain,
And fair with orchard and close wood,
From whence at last the scarped cliffs stood;
And clear now, golden in the morn,
Against the western sky upborne,
Seemed like a guarded wall, lest care
Or unrest yet should creep in there.

At John's back now bright the sun shone
Once more, once more with all light gone,
Above the further hills hung high,
The pale thin moon was in the sky;
Then he cried out:
"Ah, end the strife,
Twin lights of God; give death or life!
Surely shall I be lying soon
East of the Sun, West of the Moon;
What matter if alive or dead,
If so once more our lips are wed!"

And now he 'gan to look around,
To see how he the lower ground
Might gain, for there the hill had end
In shear rocks, so he needs must wend
Along its rugged brow; at last,
When he a little way had passed,
The hill's crest lowered, and 'gan draw
Back from the vale, and then he saw
How it grew wide, and 'neath his eyes
The river wound now circle-wise,
And at the furthest curve thereof
There lay, half hid by close and grove,
A marvellous house, that jewel-like

Gleamed, where the sun its roofs did strike,
Or strange-wrought walls; down-gazing now
With fluttering heart, he wondered how
Its white walls, and its roofs that burned,
Should seem e'en like a dream returned
From the forgotten land; then down
The hill-side, soft and easy grown,
He slipped, and when he reached the way
Folk stirred about the morn of day
In field and house: fair folk were all
He saw, and yet a chill did fall
Upon him when he noted them;
White linen, well-embroidered hem,
Round clean-made limbs he saw; above
Were faces sweet, well wrought for love;
Yet man and maid, young folk and old,
With sad eyes, lonely, strange, and cold,
Still seemed to go upon their ways.
Moreover, none on him did gaze;
And if their eyes met his, as though
They saw him not, past did they go;
Nor heard he any spoken word
Amongst them, nor saw any stirred
To laugh or smile by anything.
But fearful, yet his hope did cling
Unto his heart, nay more, he thought
Once more that surely not for nought
Among such marvels he was come.

So forth he passed by house and home
E'en like a ghost; the open door
Of one fair house he stood before,
Where folk got ready for their meal,
With little sign of woe or weal;
And as he stood before their eyes,
They looked his way with no surprise,
Nor seemed to see him: nought they spake,
Neither durst he the silence break,
But went his ways.
A tall man stood
By the wayside a-hewing wood,
And close by was a fair-haired child,
Who watched him, but spake not nor smiled,
Nor looked up at the wayfarer;
John strove to make this goodman hear,
Crying out to him cheerily
What land of all lands this might be;
But nowise did he turn him round,
Nor did the youngling heed the sound.
Next, as he turned therefrom, there came
Along the road an ancient dame,
High-perched upon a mule, a lad
Of fifteen springs his left hand had
Upon the bell-hung bridle-rein—
—And still with these were all words vain.
So on he went, and no more speech
Had heart to try till he did reach
The delicate house; and in the square
Before it was a conduit fair,
Where to and fro the girls did pass,
Bearing their jars of earth or brass;
Shrill sounded there the grey doves' wings,
The steep roof knew their murmurings,
The sparrows chirped, the brass did clash,
The water on the stones did plash,
The damsels' wind-blown raiment fair
And tinkling gold toys sounded there,
But not their voices: unto one
Who stood and watched the water run
Over her jar's lip pensively
John turned, for kind she seemed to be:
But when with soft beseeching eyes
He spake, still in no other wise
She dealt with him than had the rest;
So when with growing fear oppressed
He spake more earnestly, and she
Still answered nought, then timidly
Upon her hand his hand he laid;
Warm was it, but no heed she paid
Unto the touch, and he fell back,
Wondering what thing those folk did lack
That yet they died not: but still burned
Hope midst of fear, and now he turned
Unto the palace door, wherethrough
Passed fair-clad people to and fro.

When he essayed to enter in
None stayed or heeded; he did win
Into a fair porch, set around
With images of maidens crowned
And kings all-armed; through this he gained
A pillared court, where waxed and waned
A babbling fountain; maidens fair
And slim youths saw he loitering there
As lovers loiter; but their eyes,
Listless and sad, changed in nowise
As past he brushed with hurrying feet
And glittering eyes: then did he meet
The all-armed clashing guard, and then
The long line of the serving-men
Bearing up victuals to the hall,
And, without bell or trumpet-call,
Thither folk streamed. He went with them,
And many a wrought cloak and rich hem
Brushed past him, many a jewelled sword
Clinked at the side of knight or lord,
And no word spoken yet—at last
Into the mighty hall he passed,
And thought no greatest king on earth,
E'en were it he of Micklegarth,
Or the great lord of Babylon,
So fair a place as that had won.

Now there he stood, till every place
Was filled, save midmost of the dais

The high-seat lacked a man; so then
He laughed loud mid those silent men,
Grown reckless in that kingdom cold,
And clad in rags mid silk and gold,
Barefooted in that dainty hall,
He strode up to the ivory stall,
And sat him down, and laughed once more
Unheeded, while the servers bore
Unto the guests rich meats and drink;
Nor from the victuals did he shrink,
But well his hunger satisfied
Though not long there might he abide,
For still his lovesome restlessness
Midst all upon his heart did press.

So rising ere the feast was done,
He paced the echoing hall alone,
And passed the door, and wandered now,
Unchecked by any, high or low;
And saw strange things and fair; at last
A silent maid his side brushed past,
And to a carven door did wend,
At a long cloister's nether end,
Passed in and shut it to again.
Then John stood still and strove in vain,
With a new hope and gathering fear,
And weakly drew the door anear,
And laid his hand upon the latch,
And with a sob his breath must catch
Because of thronging memories.
He opened the door now, with eyes
Cast down for fear, and therewith heard,
As heretofore, no spoken word;
But rustling as of women's gear
And gentle breathing did he hear
And the dull noise upon the ground
Of restless spindles; all around
Floated a delicate sweet scent,
As though the wind o'er blossoms went.

His breath came fast, his fevered blood
Tingled and changed, as there he stood,
And each 'gainst each now smote his knees;
E'en as a world of images
The past was grown to him; he knew
What in those days he used to do,
But knew not what it meant; and yet
Would she the past days quite forget,
And was she like these dead-alive?

None came, sore trembling did he strive
To search the strange place through, but still
His hope, fear-tangled, and the ill
That might be, bound his eyes full fast
A long while—crying out at last
E'en ere his eyes had left the ground,
As one who some lost thing has found,
He stepped forth, and with all surprise
Made nought by love, his mortal eyes,
His weary eyes, beheld indeed
His heart's desire, his life, his need,
Still on the earth, still there for him;
And as he gazed, most weak and dim,
Seemed all the visions wherewith he
Was wont to feed his misery,
To dull the pain unsatisfied,
That still for death or presence cried.

Round the World's Love, the glorious one,
My tale says, many maidens spun,
Howso John's eyes beheld them not,
And she upon her knees had got
Some broidery fair, and whiles her hand
Moved by her half-dead will's command
Would raise it up, and whiles again,
As too much all in all grew pain,
Would let it fall adown: her face
Was altered nothing from the grace
That he remembered, save that erst
A sad smile even at the worst
Would gleam across her pity, but now
Betwixt her round chin and smooth brow
Lay bound the sorrow of the years,
Too sharp for smiles, too hard for tears:
Sometimes as some sweet memory
Pierced the dull present, wearily
She writhed her neck, and raised her head;
Sometimes her hands, as feebly led
By ghosts of her old longings, moved
As though toward some one long time loved,
And long time lost; then from her seat
Whiles she half rose as if to meet
Loved footfalls half-remembered; then
The dull pain swallowed all again;
Its child, dull patience, death-in-life,
Choked down the rising rest of strife.

Scarcely his feet might bear him o'er
The smoothness of the marble floor
Unto her feet; scarce might he raise
His wild eyes to her weary face,
Scarcely his hand had strength to touch
The open hand he loved so much;
And yet his thirsting lips love drew
Unto dear eyes that nothing knew
What closed their lids; to lips still warm,
But all forgetful of the harm
Their fruitful sweetness erst had wrought;
To feet desired, that erewhile brought
Love's grief on the sad moaning man,
Who fawned on them with lips grown wan,
And cheeks grown thin for lack of love.

How might he tell if aught could move
Her grief-chilled heart; yet love slew fear,

Lulled speech to sleep—sweet to be near;
Yea, e'en if all were changed, if all
Into this dumb, strange life must fall,
And all the longing and the pain
For signs of love were spent in vain;
If, in strange wise together brought,
They were apart still, and still nought
Might tell of better hope! O sweet
Beyond all words, there at her feet
To lie and watch her! By what word
Might his deep love be better heard
Than by that silence.
Nought he said
A long while, and her weary head
Hung low, and still she saw him not.
At last the heart in him waxed hot,
And he cried out:
"Time long ago,
How long, how long, I know not now,
I sinned and lost thee: scarce a hope
Was left with the dull years to cope;
Yet this my hand now touches thee,
My cheek is laid upon thy knee;
I am thy love, belovéd, come,
I know not how, to thy new home!"

She moved not, but a rush of tears
Blinded his eyes, as all the years
With all their pain rose up to him;
Her head moved then, through foot and limb
A tremor ran, as the tears fell
Upon her hands:
"O love, scarce well,"
He sobbed, "that we should be apart
My sorrow laid upon thy heart,
And my heart worn with thine, my love—
No word 'twixt lips and lips, to move
The double burden—found at last,
What chain is this that binds thee fast?
Was my great grief so hard to bear
That thou art grown cold? Sweet and dear
I bore thy grief yet love and live!"

He trembled, for she seemed to strive
To grasp strange thoughts that flitted round,
She clenched her delicate hands, and frowned,
And her feet moved uncertainly,
The while the maidens sitting by
Spun and spun on, nor changed at all.

Then a strange thought on him did fall,
To choke his tears back and tell o'er
The story of his longing sore,
E'en from that well-remembered day
When in the hawthorn-brake he lay.
God wot, if his hand trembled oft
As he recalled words sweet and soft,
And tender touches, all the bliss
Of clinging hand and lingering kiss!
God wot if he stayed tremblingly
As from her breast brake forth a sigh
And she fell trembling! And at last,
Amidst his tale of how she passed
Away from him, and left him bare
In the rough world of hate and care,
Her fingers tightened round his own,
And murmurs like a tender moan
Parted her lips; he stayed awhile,
And on his face a quivering smile
Masked the unshed tears, as he told
How in that morning drear and cold
He found her gone: and therewith she
Raised up her head, and eagerly
Gazed round, and yet looked not on him:

"No hope," he said, "however dim,
At first, sweet love, abode with me;
I know not how I lived; the sea,
The earth, and sky, that day had grown
A heavy burden all mine own;
As if mine hand all things had wrought
To find their strength come all to nought,
Their beauty perished, all made vain,
Unnoticed parts of the huge pain
That filled the world and crushed my heart.
Then first, the heavy veil to part,
Came memory of thy mouth divine,
Some image of a word of thine—
—Is it not so that thou saidst this,
That morn that parted me and bliss,
'Ah, couldst thou know, I go too soon
East of the Sun, West of the Moon?'"

With a great sigh, as one who throws
A burden off, that sweet arose,
And stood before him, trembling sore
With love and joy; ah, me! once more
Fulfilled of love their kind eyes met,
Although apart they stood as yet,
Helpless with pain of ecstasy;
Till from her lips a joyful cry,
Ringing and sweet, burst forth, and he,
Strong no more with love's misery,
Faint, changed with this new joyful love,
His wandering hands toward her did move
E'en but a little way. But round
His fluttering heart her arms she wound,
And kissed his pale cheeks red again,
And hung above his lovesome pain,
Desiring him as the spring yearns
For the young summer sun, that burns
His soft heart into fruitful death.
His parched mouth felt her odorous breath
His weary burning head did rest
Upon the heaven of her sweet breast,

His mazed ears heard her tender speech;
His eyes, his silence did beseech
For more and more and more of love.

How this their joy fulfilled might move
The world around I know not well;
But yet this idle dream doth tell
That no more silent was the place,
That new joy lit up every face,
That joyous lovers kissed and clung,
E'en as these twain, that songs were sung
From mouth to mouth in rose-bowers,
Where, hand in hand and crowned with flowers,
Folk praised the Lover and Beloved
That such long years, such pain had proved.
But soft, they say, their joyance was
When midst them soon the twain did pass,
Hand locked in hand, heart kissing heart,
No more this side of death to part—
—No more, no more—Full soft I say
Their greetings were that happy day,
As though in pensive semblance clad;
For fear their faces over-glad
This certain thing should seem to hide,
That love can ne'er be satisfied.

O'ER Gregory's eyes the pain of morn
Flashed suddenly, and all forlorn
Of late-gained clean-forgot delight,
He sat up, scowling on the bright
Broad day that lit the hurrying crowd
Of white-head waves; while shrill and loud
About him cried the gulls; but he
Lay still with eyes turned toward the sea,
And yet beholding nought at all,
Till into ill thoughts did he fall,
Of what a rude and friendless place
The world was, through what empty days
Men were pushed slowly down to death.
Then o'er the fresh morn's breezy breath
Was borne his fellows' cheery cry;
He rose up, sighing heavily,
And turned round to the steep grey bent,
Whereunder had been pitched their tent
Upon the odorous thymy grass.
And down the slope he saw them pass,
And heard their voices blithe enough:
But loathsome unto him, and rough
Must all men seem upon that morn,
Their speech a hard thing to be borne.

He stood by as they launched the boat,
And little did their labour note,
And set no hand thereto at all;
Until an awe on these did fall;
They muttered, "Ah, the Star-gazer
Beholdeth strange things drawing near!"
So somewhat silently they sailed
In up the firth, till the wind failed,
Betwixt the high cliffs, and with oars
They swept midmost the rocky shores
And spake few words.
But smoother now
Was grown the worn Star-gazer's brow,
And his thin lips were less close-set,
For well-nigh now did he forget
Fellows and boat and land and sea,
And, waking, seemed no less to be
East of the Sun, West of the Moon,
And when they landed at high-noon,
From all men would he go apart
In woods and meads, and deal by art
With his returning memory;
And, some things gained, and some slipped by,
His weary heart a while to soothe,
He wove all into verses smooth,
As tells the tale; that wotteth not
How much its last-told words have got
That his hand writ: for soothly he
Was deemed a craftsmaster to be
In those most noble days of old,
Whose words were e'en as kingly gold
To our thin brass, or drossy lead:
—Well, e'en so all the tale is said
How twain grew one and came to bliss—
Woe's me! an idle dream it is!

THE autumn day, the strange and dreamy tale
Were soft as far-off bells adown a vale,
Borne to the hill-top on the fitful wind;
And like their music past, they left behind
Sad thoughts of old desires unsatisfied,
And pain and joy that long ago had died,
Yea, long been buried 'neath the strife of days,
Too hard and hapless any woe to raise
And crown it with the flowery, fleeting crown
Of that strange rest, whose seed is all unknown,
That withereth while reproachfully we say:
"Why grow'st thou unsought 'neath my hand to-day,
Whose longed-for scent through many an ill day sought,
Swift healing to my sickening soul had brought
And kept me young. Fair rest, what dost thou here?"

The wind dealt with the autumn haze, and clear
The afternoon was, though the great clouds drew
In piled-up hills across the faint-streaked blue,
And 'gainst them showed the wind-hover's dark spot,
Nor yet midst trembling peace was change forgot.

OCTOBER.

O LOVE, turn from the unchanging sea, and gaze
Down these grey slopes upon the year grown old,
A-dying mid the autumn-scented haze,
That hangeth o'er the hollow in the wold,
Where the wind-bitten ancient elms enfold
Grey church, long barn, orchard, and red-roofed stead,
Wrought in dead days for men a long while dead.

Come down, O love; may not our hands still meet,
Since still we live to-day, forgetting June,
Forgetting May, deeming October sweet—
—O hearken, hearken! through the afternoon,
The grey tower sings a strange old tinkling tune!
Sweet, sweet, and sad, the toiling year's last breath,
Too satiate of life to strive with death.

And we too—will it not be soft and kind,
That rest from life, from patience and from pain;
That rest from bliss we know not when we find;
That rest from Love which ne'er the end can gain?—
—Hark, how the tune swells, that erewhile did wane!
Look up, love!—ah, cling close and never move!
How can I have enough of life and love?

OCTOBER drew our elders to a house,
That mid the tangled vines, and clamorous
Glad vintagers, stood calm, slim-pillared, white,
As though it fain would hide away from sight
The joy that through the sad lost autumn rung.
As hot the day was, as when summer hung,
With worn feet, on the last step of July,
Ashamed to cast its flowery raiment by:
Round the old men the white porch-pillars stood,
Gold-stained, as with the sun, streaked as with blood,
Blood of the earth, at least; and to and fro
Before them did the high-girt maidens go,
Eager, bright-eyed, and careless of to-morn;
And young men with them, nowise made forlorn
By love and autumn-tide; and in nowise
Content to pray for love with hopeless eyes,
Close lips, and timid hands; rather, indeed,
Lest youth and life should fail them at their need,
At what light joyous semblance of him ran
Amidst the vines, 'twixt eyes of maid and man,
Wilfully blind they caught.
But now at last,
As in the apple-gathering tide late past,
So would the elders do now; in a while,
He who should tell the tale, with a grave smile,
And eyes fixed on the fairest damsel there,
Began to say: "Ye blithe folk well might bear
To hearken to a sad tale; yet to-day
No heart I have to cast all hope away
From out my history: so be warned hereby,
Nor wait unto the end, deliciously
To nurse your pity; for the end is good
And peaceful, howso buffeting and rude
Winds, waves, and men were, ere the end was done."

The sweet eyes that his eyes were set upon
Were hid by shamefast lids as he did speak,
And redder colour burned on her fresh cheek,
And her lips smiled, as, with a half-sad sigh,
He 'gan to tell this lovesome history.

THE STORY OF ACONTIUS AND CYDIPPE.

ARGUMENT.

A certain man coming to Delos beheld a noble damsel there, and was smitten with the love of her, and made all things of no account but the winning of her; which at last he brought about in strange wise.

A CERTAIN island-man of old,
Well fashioned, young, and wise and bold,
Voyaged awhile in Greekish seas,
Till Delos of the Cyclades
His keel made, and ashore he went;
And, wandering with no fixed intent,
With others of the shipmen there,
They came into a garden fair,
Too sweet for sea-tossed men, I deem,
If they would scape the lovesome dream
That youth and May cast o'er the earth;
If they would keep their careless mirth
For hands of eld to deal withal.

So in that close did it befall
That 'neath the trees well wrought of May
These sat amidmost of the day
Not dry-lipped, and belike a-strain
All gifts of that sweet time to gain,
And yet not finding all enow
That at their feet the May did throw;
But longing, half-expecting still
Some new delight their cup to fill—
Yea, overfill, to make all strange
Their lazy joy with piercing change.
Therewith their youngest, even he
I told of first, all suddenly
'Gan sing a song that fitted well
The thoughts that each man's heart did tell
Unto itself, and as his throat
Moved with the music, did he note
Through half-shut eyes a company
Of white-armed maidens drawing nigh,
Well marshalled, as if there they went
Upon some serious work intent.

SONG.

FAIR is the night and fair the day,
Now April is forgot of May,
Now into June May falls away;
Fair day, fair night, O give me back
The tide that all fair things did lack
Except my love, except my sweet!

Blow back, O wind! thou art not kind,
Though thou art sweet; thou hast no mina
Her hair about my sweet to wind;
O flowery sward, though thou art bright,
I praise thee not for thy delight,
Thou hast not kissed her silver feet.

Thou know'st her not, O rustling tree,
What dost thou then to shadow me,
Whose shade her breast did never see?
O flowers, in vain ye bow adown!
Ye have not felt her odorous gown
Brush past your heads my lips to meet.

Flow on, great river—thou mayst deem
That far away, a summer stream,
Thou sawest her limbs amidst thee gleam,
And kissed her foot, and kissed her knee,
Yet get thee swift unto the sea!
With nought of true thou wilt me greet.

And thou that men call by my name,
O helpless one, hast thou no shame
That thou must even look the same,
As while agone, as while agone,
When thou and she were left alone,
And hands, and lips, and tears did meet?

Grow weak and pine, lie down to die,
O body in thy misery,
Because short time and sweet goes by;
O foolish heart, how weak thou art!
Break, break, because thou needs must part
From thine own love, from thine own sweet!

What was it that through half-shut eyes
Pierced to his heart, and made him rise
As one the July storm awakes
When through the dawn the thunder breaks?
What was it that the languor clove,
Wherewith unhurt he sang of love?
How was it that his eyes had caught
Her eyes alone of all; that nought
The others were but images,
While she, while she amidst of these
Not first or last—when she was gone,
Why must he feel so left alone?
An image in his heart there was
Of how amidst them one did pass
Kind-eyed and soft, and looked at him;
And now the world was waxen dim
About him, and of little worth,
Seemed all the wondrous things of earth,
And fain would he be all alone,
To wonder why his mirth was gone;
To wonder why it seemed so strange
That in nought else was any change,
When his old life seemed passed away,
And joy in narrow compass lay,
He scarce knew where. With laugh and song
His fellows mocked the dim world's wrong,
Nor noted him as changed o'ermuch;
Or if their jests his mood did touch,
To his great wonder lightly they
By stammering word were turned away.

Well, from the close they went at last,
And through the noble town they passed,
And saw the wonders wrought of old
Therein, and heard famed stories told
Of many a thing; and as a dream
Did all things to Acontius seem.
But when night's wings came o'er that place,
And men slept, piteous seemed his case
And wonderful, that therewithal
Night helped him not. From wall to wall
Night-long his weary eyes he turned,
Till in the east the daylight burned.
And then the pang he would not name,
Stung by the world's change, fiercer came
Across him, and in haste he rose,
Driven unto that flowery close
By restless longing, knowing not
What part therein his heart had got,
Nor why he thitherward must wend.

And now had night's last hope an end,
When to the garden-gate he came.
In grey light did the tulip flame
Over the sward made grey with dew;
And as unto the place he drew
Where yesterday he sang that song
The ousel-cock sang sweet and strong,
Though almost ere the sky grew grey
Had he begun to greet the day.
There now, as by some strong spell bound,
Acontius paced that spot of ground,
Restless, with wild thoughts in his head;
While round about the white-thorn shed
Sweet fragrance, and the lovely place,
Lonely of mankind, lacked no grace
That love for his own home would have.
Well sang the birds, the light wind drave
Through the fresh leaves, untouched as yet
By summer and its vain regret;
Well piped the wind, and as it swept
The garden through, no sweet thing slept,
Nor might the scent of blossoms hide
The fresh smell of the country-side
Borne on its breath; and the green bay,
Whose breast it kissed so far away,
Spake sometimes yet amid the noise
Of rustling leaves and song-birds' voice.

So there awhile our man did pace,
Still wondering at his piteous case
That, certes, not to any one
Had happed before—awhile agone
So pleased to watch the world pass by
With all its changing imagery;
So hot to play his part therein,
From each day's death good life to win;
And now, with a great sigh, he saw
The yellow level sunbeams draw
Across the wet grass, as the sun
First smote the trees, and day begun
Smiled on the world, whose summer bliss
In nowise seemed to better his.
Then, as he thought thereof, he said:
"Surely all wisdom is clean dead
Within me. Nought I lack that I,
By striving, may not come anigh
Among the things that men desire;
And why then like a burnt-out fire,
Is my life grown?"
E'en as he spoke
A throstle-cock beside him broke
Into the sweetest of his song,
Yet with his sweet note seemed to wrong
The unknown trouble of that morn,
And made him feel yet more forlorn.
Then he cried out, "O fool, go forth!
The world is grown of no less worth
Than yester-morn it was; go then
And play thy part among brave men
As thou hadst will to do before
Thy feet first touched this charmed shore
Where all is changed."
But now the bird

Flew from beside him, and he heard
A rustling nigh, although the breeze
Had died out mid the thick-leaved trees.
Therewith he raised his eyes and turned,
And a great fire within him burned,
And his heart stopped awhile, for there,
Against a flowering thorn-bush fair,
Hidden by tulips to the knee,
His heart's desire his eyes did see.
Clad was she e'en as is the dove,
Who makes the summer sad with love;
High-girded as one hastening
In swift search for some longed-for thing;
Her hair drawn by a silken band
From her white neck, and in her hand
A myrtle-spray. Panting she was
As from the daisies of the grass
She raised her eyes, and looked around
Till the astonished eyes she found
That saw not aught but even her.

There in a silence hard to bear,
Impossible to break, they stood,
With faces changed by love, and blood
So stirred, that many a year of life
Had been made eager with that strife
Of minutes; and so nigh she was
He saw the little blue veins pass
Over her heaving breast; and she
The trembling of his lips might see,
The rising tears within his eyes.

Then standing there in mazéd wise
He saw the black-heart tulips bow
Before her knees, as wavering now
A half-step unto him she made.
With a glad cry, though half afraid,
He stretched his arms out, and the twain,
E'en at the birth of love's great pain,
Each unto each so nigh were grown,
That little lacked to make them one—
That little lacked but they should be
Wedded that hour; knee touching knee,
Cheek laid to cheek. So seldom fare
Love's tales, that men are wise to dare;
Rather, dull hours must pass away,
And heavy day succeed to day,
And much be changed by misery,
Ere two that love may draw anigh—
And so with these. What fear or shame
'Twixt longing heart and body came
'Twere hard to tell—they lingered yet.
Well-nigh they deemed that they had met,
And that the worst was o'er; e'en then
There drew anigh the sound of men—
Loud laugh, harsh talk. With ill surprise
He saw fear change her lovesome eyes;
He knew her heart was thinking now
Of other folk, and ills that grow
From overmuch of love; but he
Cried out amidst his agony,
Yet stood there helpless, and withal
A mist across his eyes did fall,
And all seemed lost indeed, as now
Slim tulip-stem and hawthorn-bough
Slipped rustling back into their place,
And all the glory of her face
Had left the world, at least awhile,
And once more all was base and vile.

And yet, indeed, when that sharp pain
Was something dulled, and once again
Thought helped him, then to him it seemed
That she had dreamed as he had dreamed,
And, hoping not for any sight
Of love, had come made soft by night,
Made kind by longings unconfessed,
To give him good hope of the best.
Then pity came to help his love,
For now, indeed, he knew whereof
He sickened; pity came, and then
The fear of the rough sons of men;
Sore hate of things that needs must part
The loving heart from loving heart;
And at each turn it seemed as though
Fate some huge net round both did throw
To stay their feet and dim their sight
Till they were clutched by endless night;
And then he fain had torn his hair,
And cried aloud in his despair,
But stayed himself as still he thought
How even that should help him nought,
That helpless patience needs must be
His loathéd fellow. Wearily
He got him then from out the place,
Made lovely by her scarce-seen face,
And knew that day what longing meant.

But when the restless daylight went
From earth's face, through the weary night
He lay again in just such plight
As on the last night he had lain;
But deemed that he would go again
At daylight to that place of flowers.
So passed the night through all its hours,
But ere the dawn came, weak and worn,
He fell asleep, nor woke that morn
Till all the city was astir;
And waking must he think of her
Stolen to that place to find him not—
Her parted lips, her face flushed hot,
Her panting breast and girt-up gown,
Her sleeve ill-fastened, fallen adown
From one white shoulder, her grey eyes

Fixed in their misery of surprise,
As nought they saw but birds and trees;
Her woeful lingering, as the breeze
Died 'neath the growing sun, and folk
Fresh silence of the morning broke;
And then, the death of hope confessed,
The quivering lip and heaving breast,
The burst of tears, the homeward way
Made hateful by joy past away;
The dreary day made dull and long
By hope deferred and gathering wrong.
All this for him!—and thinking thus
Their twin life seemed so piteous
That all his manhood from him fled,
And cast adown upon the bed
He sobbed and wept full sore, until
When he of grief had had his fill
He 'gan to think that he might see
His love, and cure her misery
If she should be in that same place
At that same hour when first her face
Shone on him.
So time wore away
Till on the world the high noon lay,
And then at the due place he stood,
Wondering amid his love-sick mood
Which blades of grass her foot had bent;
And there, as to and fro he went,
A certain man who seemed to be
A fisher on the troubled sea,
An old man and a poor, came nigh
And greeted him and said:
"Hereby
Thou doest well to stand, my son,
Since thy stay here will soon be done,
If of that ship of Crete thou be,
As well I deem. Here shalt thou see
Each day at noon a company
Of all our fairest maids draw nigh;
To such an one each day they go
As best can tell them how to do
In serving of the dreadful queen,
Whose servant long years hath she been,
And dwelleth by her chapel fair
Within this close; they shall be here,
E'en while I speak. Wot well, fair son,
Good need it is this should be done,
For whatso hasty word is said
That day unto the moon-crowned maid,
For such an oath is held, as though
The whole heart into it did go—
Behold, they come! A goodly sight
Shalt thou have seen, e'en if to-night
Thou diest!"
Grew Acontius wan
As the sea-cliffs, for the old man
Now pointed to the gate, wherethrough
The company of maidens drew
Toward where they stood; Acontius,
With trembling lips, and piteous
Drawn brow, turned toward them, and afar
Beheld her like the morning-star
Amid the weary stars of night.
Midmost the band went his delight,
Clad in a gown of blue, whereon
Were wrought fresh flowers, as newly won
From the May fields; with one hand she
Touched a fair fellow lovingly,
The other, hung adown, did hold
An ivory harp well strung with gold;
Gaily she went, nor seemed as though
One troublous thought her heart did know.
Acontius sickened as she came
Anigh him, and with heart aflame
For very rage of jealousy,
He heard her talking merrily
Unto her fellow—the first word
From those sweet lips he yet had heard,
Nor might he know what thing she said;
Yet presently she turned her head
And saw him, and her talk she stopped
E'en therewith, and her lids down dropped,
And trembling amid love and shame
Over her face a bright flush came;
Nathless without another look
She passed him by, whose whole frame shook
With passion as an aspen leaf.

But she being gone, all blind with grief,
He stood there long, and muttered:
"Why
Would she not note my misery?
Had it been then so hard to turn
And show me that her heart did yearn
For something nigher like mine own?
O well content to leave me lone,
O well content to stand apart,
And nurse a pleasure in thine heart,
The joy of being so well beloved,
Still taking care thou art not moved
By aught like trouble!—yet beware,
For thou mayst fall for all thy care!"

So from the place he turned away;
Some secret spell he deemed there lay,
Some bar unseen, athwart that grass,
O'er which his feet might never pass
Whatso his heart bade. Hour by hour
Passed of the day, and ever slower
They seemed to drag, and ever he
Thought of her last look wearily—
Now meant it that, now meant it this;
Now bliss, and now the death of bliss.
"But O, if once again," he thought,

"Face unto face we might be brought,
Then doubt I not but I should read
What at her hands would be my meed,
And in such wise my life would guide;
Either the weary end to bide
E'en as I might, or strengthen me
To take the sweet felicity,
Casting by thought of fear or death—
But now when I must hold my breath,
Who knows how long, while scale mocks scale
With trembling joy, and trembling bale—
O hard to bear! O hard to bear!"

So spake he, knowing bitter fear
And hopeful longing's sharp distress,
But not the weight of hopelessness.

And now there passed by three days more,
And to the flowery place that bore
The sharp and sweet of his desire
Each day he went, his heart afire
With foolish hope. Each day he saw
The band of damsels toward him draw,
And trembling said, "Now, now at last
Surely her white arms will be cast
About my neck before them all;
Or at the worst her eyes will call
My feet to follow. Can it be
That she can bear my misery,
When of my heart she surely knows?"

And every day midmost the close
They met, and on the first day she
Did look upon him furtively
In loving wise; and through his heart
Love sent a pleasure-pointed dart—
A minute, and away she went,
And left him nowise more content
Than erst he had been.
The next day
Needs must she flush and turn away
Before their eyes met, and he stood
When she was gone in wretched mood,
Faint with desire.
The third day came,
And then his hungry eyes, aflame
With longing wild, beheld her pass
As though amidst a dream she was;
Then e'en ere she had left the place
With his clenched hand he smote his face,
And void of everything but pain,
Through the thronged streets the sea did gain,
Not recking aught, and there at last
His body on the sand he cast,
Nigh the green waves, till in the end
Some thought the crushing cloud did rend,
And down the tears rushed from his eyes
For ruth of his own miseries;
And with the tears came thought again
To mingle with his formless pain
And hope withal—but yet more fear,
For he bethought him now that near
The time drew for his ship to sail.
Yet was the thought of some avail
To heal the unreason of his heart,
For now he needs must play a part
Wherein was something to be done,
If he would not be left alone
Life-long, with love unsatisfied.

So now he rose, and looking wide
Along the edges of the bay,
Saw where his fellows' tall ship lay
Anigh the haven, and a boat
'Twixt shore and ship-side did there float
With balanced oars; but on the shroud
A shipman stood, and shouted loud
Unto the boat—words lost, in sooth,
But which no less the trembling youth
Deemed certainly of him must be
And where he was; then suddenly
He turned, though none pursued, and fled
Along the sands, nor turned his head
Till round a headland he did reach
A long cove with a sandy beach;
Then looking landward he saw where
A streamlet cleft the sea-cliffs bare,
Making a little valley green,
Beset with thorn-trees; and between
The yellow strand and cliff's grey brow
Was built a cottage white and low
Within a little close, upon
The green slope that the stream had won
From rock and sea; and thereby stood
A fisher, whose grey homespun hood
Covered white locks: so presently
Acontius to that man drew nigh,
Because he seemed the man to be
Who told of that fair company,
Deeming that more might there be learned
About the flame wherewith he burned.

Withal he found it even so,
And that the old man him did know,
And greeted him, and fell to talk,
As such folk will of things that balk
The poor man's fortune, waves and winds,
And changing days and great men's minds;
And at the last it so befell
That this Acontius came to tell
A tale unto the man—how he
Was fain to 'scape the uneasy sea,
And those his fellows, and would give
Gold unto him, that he might live

In hiding there, till they had sailed.
Not strange it was if he prevailed
In few words, though the elder smiled
As not all utterly beguiled,
Nor curious therewithal to know
Such things as he cared not to show.

So there alone a while he dwelt,
And lonely there, all torment felt,
As still his longing grew and grew;
And ever as hot noontide drew
From dewy dusk and sunny morn,
He felt himself the most forlorn;
For then the best he pictured her:

"Now the noon wind, the scent-bearer,
Is busy midst her gown," he said,
"The fresh-plucked flowers about her head
Are drooping now with their desire;
The grass with unconsuming fire
Faints 'neath the pressure of her feet;
The honey-bees her lips would meet,
But fail for fear; the swift's bright eyes
Are eager round the mysteries
Of the fair hidden fragrant breast,
Where now alone may I know rest—
—Ah pity me, thou pitiless!
Bless me, who know'st not how to bless;
Fall from thy height, thou highest of all,
On me a very wretch to call!
Thou, to whom all things fate doth give,
Find without me thou canst not live!
Desire me, O thou world's desire,
Light thy pure heart at this base fire!
Save me, of whom thou knowest nought,
Of whom thou never hadst a thought!
O queen of all the world, stoop down!
Before my feet cast thou thy crown!
Speak to me, as I speak to thee!"

He walked beside the summer sea
As thus he spake, at eventide;
Across the waste of waters wide;
The dead sun's light a wonder cast,
That into grey night faded fast;
And ever as the shadows fell,
More formless grew the unbreaking swell
Far out to sea; more strange and white,
More vocal through the hushing night,
The narrow line of changing foam,
That 'twixt the sand and fishes' home
Writhed, driven onward by the tide—
—So slowly by the ocean's side
He paced, till dreamy passion grew;
The soft wind o'er the sea that blew,
Dried the cold tears upon his face;
Kindly if sad seemed that lone place,
Yea, in a while it scarce seemed lone,
When now at last the white moon shone
Upon the sea, and showed that still
It quivered, though a moveless hill
A little while ago it seemed.

So, turning homeward now, he dreamed
Of many a help and miracle,
That in the olden time befell
Unto love's servants; e'en when he
Had clomb the hill anigh the sea,
And reached the hut now litten bright,
Not utterly with food and light
And common talk his dream passed by.
Yea, and with all this, presently
'Gan tell the old man when it was
That the great feast should come to pass
Unto Diana: Yea, and then
He, among all the sons of men,
E'en of that very love must speak;
Then grew Acontius faint and weak,
And his mouth twitched, and tears began
To pain his eyes; for the old man,
As one possessed, went on to tell
Of all the loveliness that well
Acontius wotted of; and now
For the first time he came to know
What name among her folk she had,
And, half in cruel pain, half glad,
He heard the old man say:
"Indeed
This sweet Cydippe hath great need
Of one to save her life from woe,
Because or ere the brook shall flow
Narrow with August 'twixt its banks,
Her folk, to win Diana's thanks,
Shall make her hers, and she shall be
Honoured of all folk certainly,
But unwed, shrunk as time goes on
Into a sour-hearted crone."

Acontius 'gan the room to pace
Ere he had done; with curious face
The old man gazed, but uttered nought;
Then in his heart Acontius thought,
"Ah when her image passeth by
Like a sweet breath, the blinded eye
Gains sight, the deaf man heareth well,
The dumb man lovesome tales can tell,
Hopes dead for long rise from their tombs,
The barren like a garden blooms;
And I alone—I sit and wait,
With deedless hands, on black-winged fate."

And so, when men had done with day,
Sleepless upon his bed he lay,
Striving to think if aught might move

Hard fate to give him his own love;
And thought of what would do belike,
And said, "To-morrow will I strike
Before the iron groweth dull."
And so, with mind of strange things full,
Just at the dawn he fell asleep,
Yet as the shadows 'gan to creep
Up the long slope before the sun,
His blinking, troubled sleep was done;
And with a start he sat upright,
Now deeming that the glowing light
Was autumn's very sun; that all
Of ill had happed that could befall.
Yet fully waked up at the last,
From out the cottage-door he passed,
And saw how the old fisherman
His coble through the low surf ran
And shouted greeting from the sea;
Then 'neath an ancient apple-tree,
That on the little grassy slope
Stood speckled with the autumn's hope
He cast him down, and slept again;
And sleeping dreamed about his pain,
Yet in the same place seemed to be,
Beneath the ancient apple-tree.
So in his dream he heard a sound
Of singing fill the air around,
And yet saw nought; till in a while
The twinkling sea's uncounted smile
Was hidden by a rosy cloud,
That seemed some wondrous thing to shroud,
For in its midst a bright spot grew
Brighter and brighter, and still drew
Unto Acontius, till at last
A woman from amidst it passed,
And, wonderful in nakedness,
With rosy feet the grass did press,
And drew anigh; he durst not move
Or speak, because the Queen of Love
He deemed he knew; she smiled on him,
And, even as his dream waxed dim,
Upon the tree-trunk gnarled and grey
A slim hand for a while did lay;
Then all waxed dark, and then once more
He lay there as he lay before,
But all burnt up the green-sward was,
And songless did the throstle pass
'Twixt dark green leaf and golden fruit,
And at the old tree's knotted root
The basket of the gatherer
Lay, as though autumn-tide were there.
Then in his dream he thought he strove
To speak that sweet name of his love
Late learned, but could not; for away
Sleep passed, and now in sooth he lay
Awake within the shadow sweet,
The sunlight creeping o'er his feet.

Then he arose to think upon
The plans that he from night had won,
And still in each, day found a flaw,
That night's half-dreaming eyes ne'er saw,
And far away all good hope seemed,
And the strange dream he late had dreamed
Of no account he made, but thought
That it had come and gone for nought.

And now the time went by till he
Knew that his keel had put to sea,
Yet after that a day or two
He waited, ere he dared to do
The thing he longed for most, and meet
His love within the garden sweet.
He saw her there, he saw a smile
The paleness of her face beguile
Before she saw him; then his heart
With pity and remorse 'gan smart;
But when at last she turned her head,
And he beheld the bright flush spread
Over her face, and once again
The pallor come, 'twixt joy and pain
His heart was torn; he turned away,
Thinking: "Long time ere that worst day
That unto her a misery
Will be, yea even as unto me,
And many a thing ere then may fall,
Or peaceful death may end it all."

The host that night his heart did bless
With praises of her loveliness
Once more, and said: "Yea, fools men are
Who work themselves such bitter care
That they may live when they are dead;
Her mother's stern cold hardihead
Shall make this sweet but dead-alive;
For who in all the world shall strive
With such an oath as she shall make?"

Acontius, for self-pity's sake,
Must steal forth to the night to cry
Some wordless prayer of agony;
And yet, when he was come again,
Of more of such-like speech was fain,
And needs must stammer forth some word,
That once more the old fisher stirred
To speech; who now began to tell
Tales of that oath as things known well,
To wise men from the days of old,
Of how a mere chance-word would hold
Some poor wretch as a life-long slave;
Nay, or the very wind that drave
Some garment's hem, some lock of hair
Against the dreadful altar there,
Had turned a whole sweet life to ill,
So heedfully must all fulfil

Their vows unto the dreadful maid.
Acontius heard the words he said
As through a thin sleep fraught with dreams,
Yet afterward would fleeting gleams
Of what the old man said confuse
His weary heart, that ne'er was loose
A minute from the bonds of love,
And still of all, strange dreams he wove.

So the time passed; a brooding life
That with his love might hold no strife
Acontius led; he did not spare
With torment vain his soul to tear
By meeting her in that same place:
No fickle hope now changed her face,
No hot desire therein did burn,
Rather it seemed her heart did yearn
With constant sorrow, and such love
As surely might the hard world move.
—Ah! shall it? Love shall go its ways,
And sometimes gather useless praise
From joyful hearts, when now at rest
The lover lies, but oftenest
To hate thereby the world is moved;
But oftenest the well-beloved
Shall pay the kiss back with a blow;
Shall smile to see the hot tears flow,
Shall answer with scarce-hidden scorn
The bitter words by anguish torn
From such a heart, as fain would rest
Silent until death brings the best.

So drew the time on to the day
When all hope must be cast away;
Late summer now was come, and still
As heeding neither good or ill
Of living men, the stream ran down
The green slope to the sea-side brown,
Singing its changeless song; still there
Acontius dwelt 'twixt slope-side fair
And changing murmur of the sea.

The night before all misery
Should be accomplished, red-eyed, wan,
He gave unto the ancient man
What wealth he had, and bade farewell
In such a voice as tale doth tell
Unto the wise; then to his bed
He crept, and still his weary head
Tossed on the pillow, till the dawn
The fruitful mist from earth had drawn.
Once more with coming light he slept,
Once more from out his bed he leapt,
Thinking that he had slept too fast,
And that all hope was over-past;
And with that thought he knew indeed
How good is hope to man at need,
Yea, even the least ray thereof.
Then dizzy with the pain of love
He went from out the door, and stood
Silent within the fruitful rood.
Still was the sunny morn and fair,
A scented haze was in the air;
So soft it was, it seemed as spring
Had come once more her arms to fling
About the dying year, and kiss
The lost world into dreams of bliss.

Now 'neath the tree he sank adown,
Parched was the sward thereby and brown,
Save where about the knotted root
A green place spread. The golden fruit
Hung on the boughs, lay on the ground;
The spring-born thrushes lurked around,
But sang not; yet the stream sang well,
And gentle tales the sea could tell.
Ere sunrise was the fisher gone,
And now his brown-sailed boat alone,
Some league or so from off the shore,
Moved slowly 'neath the sweeping oar.
So soothed by sights and sounds that day,
Sore weary, soon Acontius lay
In deep sleep as he erst had done,
And dreamed once more, nor yet had gone
E'en this time from that spot of ground;
And once more dreaming heard the sound
Of unseen singers, and once more
A pink-tinged cloud spread thwart the shore,
And a vague memory touched him now
Amidst his sleep; his knitted brow
'Gan to unfold, a happy smile
His long love-languor did beguile
As from the cloud the naked one
Came smiling forth—but not alone;
For now the image of his love,
Clad like the murmuring summer dove,
She held by the slim trembling hand,
And soon he deemed the twain did stand
Anigh his head. Round Venus' feet
Outbroke the changing spring-flowers sweet
From the parched earth of autumn-tide;
The long locks round her naked side
The sea-wind drave; lily and rose,
Plucked from the heart of her own close,
Were girdle to her, and did cling,
Mixed with some marvellous golden thing,
About her neck and bosom white,
Sweeter than their shortlived delight.
And all the while, with eyes that bliss
Changed not, her doves brushed past to kiss
The marvel of her limbs; yet strange,
With loveliness that knows no change,
Fair beyond words as she might be,
So fell it by love's mystery

That open-mouthed Acontius lay
In that sweet dream, nor drew away
His eyes from his love's pitying eyes;
And at the last he strove to rise,
And dreamed that touch of hand in hand
Made his heart faint; alas! the band
Of soft sleep, overstrained therewith,
Snapped short, and left him there to writhe
In helpless woe.
Yet in a while
Strange thoughts anew did him beguile;
Well-nigh he dreamed again, and saw
The naked goddess toward him draw,
Until the sunshine touched his face,
And stark awake in that same place
He sighed, and rose unto his knee,
And saw beneath the ancient tree,
Close by his hand, an apple lie,
Great, smooth, and golden. Dreamily
He turned it o'er, and in like mood
A long sharp thorn, as red as blood,
He took into his hand, and then,
In language of the Grecian men,
Slowly upon its side he wrote,
As one who thereof took no note,
Acontius will I wed to-day;
Then stealthily across the bay
He glanced, and trembling gat him down
With hurried steps unto the town,
Wherefor the high-tide folk were dight,
And all looked joyous there and bright,
As toward the fane their steps they bent.
And thither, too, Acontius went,
Scarce knowing if on earth or air
His feet were set; he coming there,
Gat nigh the altar standing-place,
And there with haggard eyes 'gan gaze
Upon the image of the maid
Whose wrath makes man and beast afraid.

So in a while the rites began,
And many a warrior and great man
Served the hard-hearted one, until
Of everything she had her fill
That Gods desire; and, trembling now,
Acontius heard the curved horns blow
That heralded the damsels' band;
And scarce for faintness might he stand,
When now, the minstrels' gowns of gold
Being past, he could withal behold
White raiment fluttering, and he saw
The fellows of his own love draw
Unto the altar; here and there
The mothers of those maidens fair
Went by them, proud belike, and fain
To note the honour they should gain.

Now scarce with hungry eyes might he
Gaze on those fair folk steadily,
As one by one they passed by him;
His limbs shook, and his eyes did swim,
And if he heard the words they said,
As outstretched hand and humble head
Strengthened the trembling maiden's vow,
Nought of their meaning did he know—
—And still she came not—what was this?
Had the dull death of hope of bliss
Been her death too—ah, was she dead?
Or did she lie upon her bed,
With panting mouth and fixed bright eyes,
Waiting the new life's great surprise,
All longings past, amid the hush
Of life departing?
A great rush
Of fearful pain stopped all his blood
As thus he thought; a while he stood
Blinded and tottering, then the air
A great change on it seemed to bear,
A heavenly scent; and fear was gone,
Hope but a name; as if alone
Mid images of men he was,—
Alone with her who now did pass
With fluttering hem and light footfall
The corner of the precinct wall.
Time passed, she drew nigh to the place,
Where he was standing, and her face
Turned to him, and her steadfast eyes
Met his, with no more of surprise
Than if in words she had been told
That each the other should behold
E'en in such wise— Pale was she grown;
Her sweet breath, that an unheard moan
Seemed to her lover, scarce might win
Through her half-opened lips; most thin
The veil seemed 'twixt her mournful eyes,
And death's long-looked-for mysteries;
Frail were her blue-veined hands; her feet
The pink-tinged marble steps did meet
As though all will were gone from her.
There went the matron, tall and fair,
Noble to look on, by her side,
Like unto her, but for cold pride
And passing by of twenty years,
And all their putting back of tears;
Her mother, certes, and a glow
Of pleasure lit her stern face now
At what that day should see well done.

But now, as the long train swept on,
There on the last step of the fane
She stood, so loved, so loved in vain;
Her mother fallen aback from her,
Yet eager the first word to hear
Of that her dreadful oath—so nigh

Were misery to misery,
That each might hear the other's breath;
That they this side of fair hope's death
Might yet have clung breast unto breast,
And snatched from life a little rest,
And snatched a little joy from pain.

O weary hearts, shall all be vain,
Shall all be nought, this strife and love?
—Once more with slow foot did she move
Unto the last step, with no sound
Unto Acontius turning round,
Who spake not, but, as moved at last
By some kind God, the apple cast
Into her bosom's folds—once more
She stayed, while a great flush came o'er
Her sweet face erst half-dead and wan;
Then went a sound from man to man
So fair she seemed, and some withal
Failed not to note the apple fall
Into her breast.
Now while with fear
And hope Acontius trembled there
And to her side her mother came,
She cast aside both fear and shame
From out her noble heart, and laid
Upon the altar of the Maid
Her fair right hand, clasped firm around
The golden fruit, and with no sound
Her lips moved, and her eyes upraised
Upon the marble image gazed,
With such a fervour as if she
Would give the thing humanity
And love and pity—then a space
Unto her love she turned her face
All full of love, as if to say,
"So ends our trouble from to-day,
Either with happy life or death."

Yet anxious still, with held-back breath,
He saw her mother come to her
With troubled eyes. "What hast thou there?"
He heard her say. "Is the vow made?
I heard no word that thou hast said?"

Then through him did her sweet voice thrill:
"No word I spake for good or ill;
But this spake for me; so say ye
What oath in written words may be;
Although, indeed, I wrote them nought;
And in my heart had got no thought,
When first I came hereto this morn,
But here to swear myself forlorn
Of love and hope—because the days
Of life seemed but a weary maze,
Begun without leave asked of me,
Whose ending I might never see,
Or what came after them—but now
Backward my life I will not throw
Into your deep-dug, spice-strewn grave,
But either all things will I save
This day, or make an end of all."

Then silence on the place did fall;
With frowning face, yet hand that shook,
The fated fruit her mother took
From out her hand, and pale she grew,
When the few written words she knew,
And what they meant; but speedily
She brushed the holy altar by,
Unto the wondering priests to tell
What things there in their midst befell.

There, in low words, they spoke awhile,
How they must deal with such a guile,
Cast by the goddess of desire
Into the holy maiden's fire.
And to the priests it seemed withal,
That a full oath they needs must call
That writing on the altar laid:
Then, wroth and fearful, some there bade
To seek a death for these to die,
If even so they might put by
The Maid's dread anger; crueller
They grew as still they gathered fear,
And shameful things the dusk fane heard,
As grey beard wagged against grey beard,
And fiercer grew the ancient eyes.

But from the crowd, meanwhile, did rise
Great murmuring, for from man to man
The rumour of the story ran,
I know not how; and therewithal
Some god-sent lovesome joy did fall
On all hearts there, until it seemed
That each one of his own soul dreamed.
Beloved, and loving well; and when
Some cried out that the ancient men
Had mind to slay the lovers there,
A fierce shout rent the autumn air:
"Nay, wed the twain; love willeth it!"
But silent did the elders sit,
With death and fear on either hand,
Till one said, "Fear not, the whole land,
Not we, take back what they did give;
With many scarce can one man strive;
Let be, themselves shall make amends."

"Yea, let be," said the next; "all ends,
Despite the talk of mortal men,
Who deem themselves undying, when,
Urged by some unknown God's commands,
They snatch at love with eager hands,
And gather death that grows thereby,

Yet swear that love shall never die—
Let be—in their own hearts they bear
The seeds of pangs to pierce and tear.
What need, White-armed, to follow them,
With well-strung bow and fluttering hem,
Adown the tangle of life's wood?
Thou knowest what the fates deem good
For wretches that love overmuch—
One mad desire for sight and touch;
One spot alone of all the earth
That seems to them of any worth;
One sound alone that they may bear
Amidst earth's joyful sounds to hear;
And sight, and sound, and dwelling-place,
And soft caressing of one face,
Forbidden, and forbidden still,
Or granted e'en for greater ill,
But for a while, that they may be
Sunk deeper into misery—
—Great things are granted unto those
That love not—far-off things brought close,
Things of great seeming brought to nought,
And miracles for them are wrought;
All earth and heaven lie underneath
The hand of him who wastes not breath
In striving for another's love,
In hoping one more heart to move.
—A light thing and a little thing,
Ye deem it, that two hearts should cling
Each unto each, till two are one,
And neither now can be alone?
O fools, who know not all has sworn
That those shall ever be forlorn
Who strive to bring this thing to pass—
So is it now, as so it was,
And so it shall be evermore,
Till the world's fashion is passed o'er."

White-bearded was the ancient man
Who spoke, with wrinkled face and wan;
But as unto the porch he turned
A red spot in his cheek there burned,
And his eyes glittered, for, behold!
Close by the altar's horns of gold,
There stood the weary ones at last,
Their arms about each other cast,
Twain no more now, they said—no more
What things soe'er fate had in store.
Careless of life, careless of death;
Now, when each felt the other's breath
On lip and cheek, and many a word
By all the world beside unheard,
Or heard and little understood,
Each spake to each, and all seemed good;
Yea, though amid the world's great wrong,
Their space of life should not be long;
O bitter-sweet if they must die!
O sweet, too sweet, if time passed by,
If time made nought for them, should find
Their arms in such wise intertwined
Years hence, with no change drawing near!

Nor says the tale, nor might I hear,
That aught of evil on them fell.
Few folk there were but thought it well,
When saffron-robed, fair-wreathed, loose-haired
Cydippe through the city fared
Well won at last; when lingering shame
Somewhat upon the lovers came,
Now that all fear was quite bygone,
And yet they were not all alone;
Because from men the sun was fain
A little more of toil to gain,
Awhile in prison of his light,
To hold aback the close-lipped night.

SILENCE a little when the tale was told,
Soon broken by the merry-voiced and bold
Among the youths, though some belike were fain
For more of silence yet, that their sweet pain
Might be made sweeter still by hope and thought
Amid the words of the old story caught—
Might be made keener by the pensive eyes
That half-confessed love made so kind and wise;
Yet these two, midst the others, went their way,
To get them through the short October day
'Twixt toil and toilsome love, e'en as they might;
If so, perchance, the kind and silent night
Might yet reward their reverent love with dreams
Less full of care.
But round the must's red streams,
'Twixt the stripped vines the elders wandered slow.
And unto them, e'en as a soothing show
Was the hid longing, wild desire, blithe hope,
That seethed there on the tangled sun-worn slope
'Twixt noon and moonrise. Resolute were they
To let no pang of memory mar their day,
And long had fear, before the coming rest,
Been set aside. And so the changéd west,
Forgotten of the sun, was grey with haze;
The moon was high and bright, when through the maze
Of draggled tendrils back at last they turned,
And red the lights within the fair house burned
Through the grey night; strained string, and measured voice
Of minstrels, mingled with the varying noise
Of those who through the deep-cut misty roads
Went slowly homeward now to their abodes.
A short space more of that short space was gone,
Wherein each deemed himself not quite alone.

In late October, when the failing year
But little pleasure more for men might bear,
They sat within the city's great guest-hall,
So near the sea that they might hear the fall
Of the low haven-waves when night was still.
But on that day wild wind and rain did fill
The earth and sea with clamour; and the street
Held few who cared the driving scud to meet.
But inside, as a little world it was,
Peaceful amid the hubbub that did pass
Its strong walls in untiring waves of rage,
With the earth's intercourse wild war to wage.
Bright glowed the fires, and cheerier their light
Fell on the gold that made the fair place bright
Of roof and wall, for all the outside din.
Yet of the world's woe somewhat was within
The noble compass of its walls; for there
Were histories of great striving painted fair,
Striving with love and hate, with life and death,
With hope that lies, and fear that threateneth.

And so mid varied talk the day went by,
As such days will, not quite unhappily,
Not quite a burden, till the evening came
With lulling of the storm: and little blame
The dark had for the dull day's death, when now
The good things of the hall were set aglow
By the great tapers. Midmost of the board
Sat Rolf, the captain, who took up the word,
And said:

"Fair fellows, a strange tale is this,
Heard and forgotten midst my childish bliss,
Little remembered midst the change and strife,
Come back again this latter end of life,
I know not why; yet as a picture done
For my delight, I see my father's son,
My father with the white cloth on his knees,
Beaker in hand, amid the orange-trees
At Micklegarth, and the high-hatted man
Over against him, with his visage wan,
Black beard, bright eyes, and thin composéd hands,
Telling this story of the fiery lands."

THE MAN WHO NEVER LAUGHED AGAIN.

ARGUMENT.

A certain man, who from rich had become poor, having been taken by one of his former friends to a fair house, was shown strange things there, and dwelt there awhile among a company of doleful men; but these in the end dying, and he desiring above all things to know their story, so it happened that he at last learned it to his own cost.

A CITY was there nigh the Indian Sea,
As tells my tale, where folk for many an age
Had lived, perforce, such life as needs must be
Beneath the rule of priestly king and mage,
Bearing with patient hearts the summer's rage,
Yea, even bowing foolish heads in vain
Before the mighty sun, their life and bane.

Now ere the hottest of the summer came,
While yet the rose shed perfume on the earth,
And still the grass was green despite the flame
Of that land's sun—while folk gave up to mirth
A little of their life, so little worth,
And the rich man forgot his fears awhile
Beneath the soft eve's still recurring smile—

Mid those sweet days, when e'en the burning land
Knew somewhat of the green north's summer rest,
A stately house within the town did stand,
When the fresh morn was falling from its best,
Though the street's pavement still the shadow blessed
From whispering trees, that rose, thick-leaved and tall,
Above the well-built marble bounding-wall.

Each side the door therein rose-garlands hung,
And through the doorway you might see within
The glittering robes of minstrel-men that sung,
And resting dancing-girls in raiment thin,
Because the master there did now begin
Another day of ease and revelry,
To make it harder yet for him to die.

And toward the door, perfumed and garlanded,
The guests passed, clad in wonderful attire,
And this and that one through the archway led
Some girl, made languid by the rosy fire
Of that fair time; with love and sweet desire
The air seemed filled, and how could such folk see
In any eyes unspoken misery?

Yet 'gainst the marble wall, anigh the door,
A man leaned, gazing at the passers-by,
Who, young, was clad in wretched clothes and poor,
And whose pale face, grown thin with misery,
Told truthful stories of his end anigh,
For such a one was he as rich men fear,
Friendless and poor, nor taught hard toil to bear;

And some in passing by that woeful man
A little time indeed their loud talk stayed
To gaze upon his haggard face and wan,
Some even, their hands upon their pouches laid,
But all passed on again, as if afraid
That, e'en in giving thanks for unasked gift,
His dolorous voice their veil of joy would lift.

He asked for nought, nor did his weary eyes
Meet theirs at all, until there came at last,
On a white mule, and clad in noble guise,
A lonely man, who by the poor wretch passed,
And, passing, on his face a side-glance cast,
Then o'er his shoulder eyed him, then drew rein
And turned about, and came to him again;

And said, "Thou hast the face of one I knew,
Men called the Golden One, in such a town,
Because they deemed his wealth for ever grew,
E'en in such times as beats the richest down;
What stroke of hapless fate, then, hast thou known
That thou hast come to such a state as this,
To which the poorest peasant's would be bliss?"

The other raised his eyes, and stared awhile
Into the speaker's face, as one who draws
His soul from dreams, then with a bitter smile
He said, "Firuz, thou askest of the cause
Of this my death? I knew not the world's laws,
But 'give to-day, and take to-morrow-morn,'
I needs must say, holding the wise in scorn.

"For even as with gifts contempt I bought,
So knowledge buys disease, power loneliness,
And honour fear, and pleasure pains unsought,
And friendship anxious days of great distress,
And love the hate of what we used to bless—
Ah, I am wise, and wiser soon shall grow,
And know the most that wise dead men can know.

"What shall I say? thou knowest the old tale;
I gave, I spent, and then I asked in vain,
And when I fell, my hands could scarce avail
For any work; at last, worse woe to gain,
I fled from folk who knew my present pain
And ancient pleasure—'midst strange men I wait,
In this strange town, the last new jest of fate.

"But since we talk of such-like merchandize,
What gift has bought for thee an equal curse?
Because, indeed, I deem by this thy guise
Thou hast not reached the bottom of thy purse;
Therefore, perchance, thy face seems something worse
Than mine, for I shall die, but thou must live,
More laughter yet unto the Gods to give?"

Nor did he speak these words unwarranted,
For in the other's face those signs there were
That mark the soul wherein all hope is dead;
While, with the new-born image of despair
The first man played, and found life even there,
Changeless his old friend's face was grown, and he
Had no more eyes things new or strange to see.

He said, "Then hast thou still a wish on earth;
Come now with me, if thou wouldst know my fate:
Thou yet mayst win again that time of mirth
When every day was as a flowery gate
Through which we passed to joy, importunate
To win us from the thought of yesterday,
In whatso pleasures it had passed away!'

"Great things thou promisest," the other said,
"And yet indeed since I have feared to die,
Though well I know that I were better dead,
The life thou givest me I yet will try;
It will not be so long in passing by,
If it must be such life as thou hast shared—
Yet thanks to thee who thus for me hast cared."

"Friend," said he, "in thine hand thy life thou hast,
If thou hast told me all that grieveth thee,
And unto thee the past may well be past,
And days not wholly bad thou yet mayst see;
And if indeed thy first felicity
Thou winnest not, yet something shalt thou have
Thy soul from death, or loathéd life, to save.

"And for thy thanks, something I deem I owe
To our old friendship, could I mind it aught,
And well it is that I should pay it now
While yet I have a little wavering thought
Of things without me: neither have I brought
A poisoned life to give to thee to-day,
Or such a life as I have cast away."

"Nay," said he, "let all be since I must live,
I will not think of how to play my part:
And now some food to me thou needs must give,
For wretched hunger gnaweth at my heart.
Take heed withal that old desires will start
Up to the light since first I heard thee speak,
Wretched as now I am, and pined and weak."

Firuz thenceforward scarcely seemed to heed
What words he said, but as a man well taught
To do some dull task, set himself to lead
That man unto an hostel, where they brought
Food unto him, and raiment richly wrought;
Then he being mounted on a mule, the twain
Set out therefrom some new abode to gain.

Now cheered by food, and hope at least of ease,
Perchance of something more, as on they went
Betwixt the thronged streets and the palaces,
No more did Bharam keep his head down bent,
Rather from right to left quick glances sent,
And though his old complaints he murmured still,
He scarcely thought his life so lost and ill.

But for his fellow, worse he seemed to be
Than e'en before; his thin face, pinched and grey,
Seemed sunk yet deeper into misery,
Nor did he lift his eyes from off the way,
Nor heed what things his friend to him might say,
But plodded on till they were past the town,
When now the fiery sun was falling down.

Then by the farms and fields they went, until
All tillage and smooth ways were left behind,
And half-way up a bare and rugged hill
They entered a rude forest, close and blind,
And many a tale perforce seized Bharam's mind
Of lonely men by fiends bewilderéd;
So like his fellow looked to one long dead.

But now, as careless what might hap to him,
He 'gan to sing of roses and delight
Some snatch, until the wood that had been dim,
E'en in broad day, grew black with coming night;
Then lower sank his song, and dropped outright,
When on his rein he felt his guide's hand fall,
And still they pierced that blackness like a wall.

Thus on the little-beaten forest-soil
They went, with nought to see, and nought to hear
Except their mules' unceasing, patient toil:
But full the darkness seemed of forms of fear,
And like long histories passed the minutes drear
To Bharam's o'erwrought mind expecting death;
And like a challenge seemed his lowest breath.

How long they went he knew not, but at last
Upon his face he felt a doubtful breeze,
Quickening his soul; and onward as they passed
A feeble glimmer showed betwixt the trees,
And his eyes, used to darkness, by degrees
Could dimly see his fellow, and the way
Whereon they rode to some unearthly day.

Then as the boughs grew thinner overhead,
That glimmer widened into moonlit night,
And 'twixt the trees grown sparse their pathway led
Unto a wide bare plain, that 'neath that light
Against the black trunks showed all stark and white;
Then Bharam, more at ease thereat, began
His fellow's visage in that light to scan.

No change was in his face, and if he knew
Who rode beside him, 'twas but as some hook
Within an engine knows what it must do,
His hand indeed from his friend's rein he took,
But never cast on him one slightest look;
Then, shuddering, Bharam 'gan to sing again
To make him turn, but spent his breath in vain.

But when the trees were wholly past, afar
Across the plain they saw a watch-tower high,
That 'neath the moonlight, like an angry star,
Shone over a white palace, and thereby
Within white walls did black-treed gardens lie:
And Firuz smote his mule and hastened on
To where that distant sign of trouble shone.

And as they went, thereon did Bharam stare,
Nor turned his eyes at all unto the plain,
Nor heeded when from out her form the hare
Started beneath the mule's feet, and in vain
The owl called from the wood; for he drew rein
Within a little while before the gate,
Casting his soul into the hands of fate.

Then Firuz blew the horn, nor waited long
Ere the gate, opened by a man scarce seen,
Gave entry to a garden, where the song
Of May's brown bird had hardly left the green
Sweet-blossomed tree-tops lonely, and between
The whispering glades the fountain leaped on high,
And the rose waited, till morn came, to die.

But when the first wave of that soft delight
Swept o'er the spendthrift's sense, he smiled and turned
Unto his guide throughout the wondrous night,
And while his heart with hope and wonder burned,
He said, "Indeed a fair thing have I learned
With thee for master; yet is this the end?
Will they not now bring forth the bride, O friend?"

Drunk with the sweetness of that place he spoke,
And hoped to see the mask fall suddenly
From his friend's face; from whose thin lips there broke
A dreadful cry of helpless misery,
Scaring the birds from flowery bush and tree;
"O fool!" he said; "say such things in the day,
When noise and light take memory more away!"

Bharam shrank back abashed, nor had a word
To say thereto, and 'twixt the trees they rode,
Noted of nothing but some wakeful bird,
Until they reached a fair and great abode
Whereon the red gold e'en in moonlight glowed.
There silently they lighted down before
Smooth marble stairs, and through the open door

They entered a great, dimly-lighted hall;
Yet through the dimness well our man could see
How fair the hangings were that clad the wall,
And what a wealth of beast and flower and tree
Was spent wherever carving there might be,
And what a floor was 'neath his wearied feet,
Not made for men who call death rest and sweet.

Now he, though fain to linger and to ask
What was the manner of their living there,
And what thenceforth should be his proper task,
And who his fellows were, did nowise dare
To meet that cry again that seemed to bare
A wretched life of every softening veil—
A dreadful prelude to a dreadful tale.

So silently whereas the other led
He followed, and through corridors they passed,
Dim lit, but worthy of a king new wed,
Till to a chamber did they come at last,
O'er which a little light a taper cast,
And showed a fair bed by the window-side;
Therewith at last turned round the dreary guide,

And said, "O thou to whom night still is night
And day is day, bide here until the morn,
And take some little of that dear delight,
That we for many a long day have outworn.
Sleep, and forget awhile that thou wast born,
And on the morrow will I come to thee
To show thee what thy life with us must be."

And with that word he went, and though at first
The other thought that he should never sleep
For wondering what had made that house accursed,
And sunk that seeming bliss in woe so deep,
Yet o'er his soul forgetfulness did creep,
And in a dreamless slumber long he lay,
Not knowing when the sun brought back the day.

But in broad daylight of the following morn
He woke, and o'er him saw his fellow stand,
Who seemed, if it could be, yet more forlorn
Than when he last reached out to him his hand.
But now he said, "Come thou and see the band
Of folk that thou shalt dwell with, and the home
Whereto, fate leading thee, thou now hast come."

He rose without a word, and went with him
Who led the way through pillared passages,
Dainty with marble walls, made cool and dim
By the o'erhanging boughs of thick-leaved trees
That brushed against their windows in the breeze;
And still the work of one all seemed to be
Who had a mind to mock eternity.

Too lovely seemed that place for any one
But youths and damsels, who, not growing old,
Should dwell there, knowing not the scorching sun,
Without a name for misery or for cold,
Without a use for glittering steel or gold
Except adornment; and content withal,
Though change or passion there should ne'er befall.

And still despite his fellow's woeful face,
And that sad cry that smote him yesternight,
The strange luxurious perfume of that place,
Where everything seemed wrought for mere delight,
Still made his heart beat, and his eyes wax bright
With delicate desires new-born again,
In that sweet rest from poverty and pain.

And, looking through the windows there askance,
He yet had something like a hope to see
The garden blossom into feast and dance,
Or, turning round a corner, suddenly,
Mid voices sweet, and perfumed gowns to be,
Bewildered by white limbs and glittering eyes,
Striving to learn love's inmost mysteries.

But as they went, unto a door they came
That Firuz opened, showing a great hall
Whose walls with wealth of strange-wrought gold did flame
Through a cool twilight, for the light did fall
From windows in the dome high up and small,
And Bharam's lustful hope was quenched in fear,
As he, low moaning and faint sobs could hear.

He stopped and shut his eyes, oppressed with awe,
Thinking the rites of some sad god to see—
The secrets of some blood-stained hidden law—
But Firuz grasped his arm impatiently,
And drew him in. "O friend, look up!" said he,
"Nought dwelleth here but man's accursed race,
And thou art far the mightiest in this place."

Then he, though trembling still, looked up, and there
Beheld six men clad even as his guide,
Who sat upon a bench of marble fair
Against the wall, and some their eyes must hide
When they met his, and some rose up and cried
Words inarticulate, then sank again
Into their places, as out-worn with pain.

But one against the wall, with head back thrown,
Was leaning, and his eyes wide open stared,
And by his side his nerveless hands hung down,
Nor showed his face a glimmer of surprise,
Deaf was he to the wisest of the wise,
Speechless though open-mouthed; for there sat he,
Dead midst the living slaves of misery.

Bharam stared at him, wondering, still in dread;
But no heed took his fellows of his case,
Till Firuz, with a side-glance at him, said,
"Why mourn ye more that yet another face
Must see our shame and sorrow in this place?
Do ye not know this worldly man is come
To lay the last one of us in his home?

"And now in turn another soul is gone,
Get ready then to bear him forth straightway.
Be patient, for the heavy days crawl on!
But thou, O friend, I pray thee from this day
Help thou us helpless men, who cannot pray
Even to die; no long time will it be
Ere we shall leave this countless wealth to thee.

"Behold, a master, not a slave, we need,
For we, I say, have neither will to die
Nor yet to live, yet will we pay good heed
To thy commands, still doing patiently
Our daily tasks, as the dull time goes by;
Drive us like beasts, yea, slay us if thou wilt,
Nor will our souls impute to thee the guilt.

"Yet ask us not to tell thee of our tale,
Why we are brought unto this sad estate,
Nor for the rest will any words avail
To make us flee from this lone house, where fate
With all its cruel sport will we await;
Lo, now thy task, O fellow! in return
A mighty kingdom's wealth thou soon shalt earn."

Now as he spoke, a hard forgetfulness
Of his own lot, the rich man's cruel pride,
Smote Bharam's heart; he thought, "What dire distress
Could make me cast all hope of life aside?
Could aught but death my life and will divide?
Surely this mood of theirs will pass away
And these walls yet may see a merry day."

So thought he, yet, beholding them again,
And seeing them so swallowed up with woe
That they scarce heeded him, a pang of pain
Like pleasure's death throughout his heart did go;
And therewithal a strong desire to know
The utmost of their tale possessed his mind,
And made him scorn an easy life and blind.

So midst his silence neither spoke they aught:
Firuz himself, as one, who having laid
His charge upon another, may take thought
Of his own miseries, sat with head down-weighed,
With tears that would not flow; then Bharam said,
"Masters, I bid you rise and do your best
To give your fellow's body its due rest!"

They rose up at his words and straight began,
As men who oft had had such things to do,
To dress the body of the just-dead man
For his last resting-place, then two and two
They bore it forth, passing the chambers through,
Where Bharam on that morn had hoped to see
Fair folk that had no name for misery.

Then through the sunny pleasance slow they passed,
That sweet with flowers behind the palace lay,
Until they reached a thick, black wood at last,
Bounding the garden as the night bounds day;
And through a narrow path they took their way,
Less like to men than shadows in a dream,
Till the wood ended at a swift broad stream;

Beneath the boughs dark green it ran, and deep,
Well-nigh awash with the wood's tangled grass,
But on the other side wall-like and steep,
Straight from the gurgling eddies, rose a mass
Of dark grey cliff, no man unhelped could pass;
But a low door e'en in the very base
Was set, above the water's hurrying race.

Of iron seemed that door to Bharam's eyes,
Heavily wrought, and closely locked it seemed;
But as he stared thereon strange thoughts would rise
Within his heart, until he well-nigh deemed
That he in morning sleep of such things dreamed,
And dreamed that he had seen all this before,
Wood and deep river, cliff, and close-shut door.

But in the stream, and close unto his feet,
A boat there lay, as though for wafting o'er
Whoso had will such doubtful things to meet
As that strange door might hide; and on the shore,
About the path, a rod of ground or more
Was cleared of wood, in which space here and there
Low, changing mounds told of dead men anear.

So there that doleful company made stay,
And 'twixt the trees and swift stream hurrying by,
Their brother's body in the earth did lay.
Nor ever to the cliff would raise an eye,
But trembling, as with added agony,
Did their dull task as swiftly as they could,
Then went their way again amidst the wood.

Now with these dreary folk must Bharam live
Henceforward, doing even as he would;
And many a joy the palace had to give
To such a man as e'en could find life good
So prisoned, and with nought to stir the blood,
And seeing still from weary day to day
These wretched mourners cast their lives away.

Yet came deliverance; one by one they died,
E'en as new-come he saw that man die first,
And so were buried by the river-side.
And ever as he saw these men accurst
Vanish from life, he grew the more athirst
To know what evil deed had been their bane,
But still were all his prayers therefor in vain.

His utmost will in all things else they did,
Serving as slaves if he demanded aught,
But in grim silence still their story hid;
Nor did he fare the better when he sought
In the fair parchments that scribes' hands had wrought
Within that house. Of many a tale they told;
But none the tale of that sad life did hold.

Therefore in silence he consumed his days
Until a weary year had clean gone by
Since first upon that palace he did gaze,
And all that doleful band had he seen die,
Except Firuz; and ever eagerly
Did Bharam watch him, lest he too should go
And make an end of all he longed to know.

At last a day came when the mourner said,
"Beneath the ground my woe thou soon shalt lay,
And all our foolish sorrow shall be dead;
Come then, I fain would show thee the straight way
Through which we came the night of that past day

When first I brought thee here. This knowledge thine,
Guard thou this house, and use it as a mine;

"While safe thou dwellest in some city fair,—
Hasten, for little strength is in me now!"
But Bharam thought, "Yet will he not lay bare
His story to me utterly, and show
What thing it was that brought these men so low."
Yet said he nought, but from the house they went,
While painfully the mourner on him leant.

So, the wood gained, by many glades they passed
That Firuz heeded not, though they were wide,
Until they reached a certain one at last,
Whereon he said, "Here did we come that tide;
I counsel thee no longer to abide
When I am dead, but mount my mule and go,
Nor doubt the beast the doubtful way shall know.

"She too shall serve thee when thou com'st again,
With many men, and sumpter mules enow
To gather up the wealth we held in vain,—
Turn me, I would depart! fainter I grow!
And thou the road to happy life dost know.
Alas, my feet are heavy! nor can I
Go any further. Lay me down to die!"

Then 'gainst a tree-root Bharam laid his head,
Saying, "Fear not, thou hast been good to me,
And by the river-side, when thou art dead,
I will not fail to lay thee certainly!"
"Nay, nay," he said, "what matter—let it be!
I bring the dismal rite unto an end.
Hide my bones here, and toward thy city wend!

"Better perchance that thou beholdest not
That place once more, our misery and our bane!"
Then at that word did Bharam's heart wax hot;
He seemed at point his whole desire to gain.
He cried aloud, "Nay, surely all in vain
Thy secret hast thou hidden till this day,
Since to the mystic road thou showest the way!"

"My will is weak," his friend said, "thine is strong;
Draw near, and I will tell thee all the tale,
If this my feeble voice will last so long.
Perchance my dying words may yet avail
To make thee wise. This pouch of golden scale,
Open thou it. The gold key hid therein
Opens the story of our foolish sin.

"How thy face flushes, holding it! Just so,
As by that door I stood, did my face burn
That summer morning past so long ago.
Draw nigher still if thou the tale wouldst learn.
I scarce can speak now, and withal I yearn
To die at last, and leave the thing unsaid.
Raise thou me up, or I shall soon be dead!"

His fellow raised him trembling, nor durst speak
Lest he should scare his feeble life away,
Then from his mouth came wailing words, and weak:
"Where art thou then, O loveliest one, to-day?
Beneath the odorous boughs that gladden May,
Laid in the thymy hollow of some hill,
Dost thou remember me a little still?

"Can kindness such as thine was, vanish quite
And be forgotten? Ah, if I forget,
Canst thou forget the love and fresh delight
That held thee then—my love that even yet
Midst other love must make thy sweet eyes wet,
At least sometimes, at least when heaven and earth
In some fair eve are grown too fair for mirth?

"O joy departed, know'st thou how at first
I prayed in vain, and strove with hope to dull
My ravening hunger, mock my quenchless thirst?
And know'st thou not how when my life was full
Of nought but pain, I strove asleep to lull
My longing for the eyeless, hopeless rest,
Lest even yet strange chance should bring the best?

"Farewell, farewell, belovéd! I depart,
But hope, once dead, now liveth though I die,
Whispering of marvels to my fainting heart—
Perchance the memory of some written lie,
Perchance the music of the rest anigh;
I know not—but farewell, be no more sad!
For life and love that has been, I am glad."

He ceased, and his friend, trembling, faintly said—
"Wilt thou not speak to me? what hast thou done?"
But even as he spoke, the mourner's head
Fell backward, and his troubled soul was gone;
And Bharam, in the forest left alone,
Durst scarcely move at first for very fear,
And longing for the tale he was to hear.

But in a while the body down he laid,
And swiftly gat him o'er the hot dry plain,
And through the garden, as a man afraid,
Went softly, and the golden porch did gain,
And from the wealth those men had held in vain,
Most precious things he did not spare to take
For his new life and joyous freedom's sake.

So doing he came round unto the door
That led out to the passage through the wood,
Wherethrough the mourners erst their dead ones bore
Down to the river; but as there he stood
He felt a new fire kindling in his blood;
His sack he laid aside, and touched the key
That could unlock that dreadful history;

And his friend's words, that loving tender voice
He sent forth ere he died, smote on his heart:
How could he leave those dead men and rejoice
With folk who in their story had no part?
Yea, as he lingered did the hot tears start
Into his eyes, he wept, and knew not why;
Some pleasure seemed within his grasp to lie,

He could not grasp or name, and none the less
He muttered to himself, "I must be gone
Or I shall die in this fair wilderness,
That every minute seems to grow more lone;
Why do I stand here like a man of stone?"
And with that very word he moved indeed,
But took the path that toward the stream did lead.

Quickly he walked with pale face downward bent,
As 'twixt the trembling tulip-beds he passed,
Until a horror seized him as he went,
And, turning toward the house, he ran full fast,
Nor, till he reached it, one look backward cast;
And by the gathered treasure, left behind
Awhile ago, he stood confused, half blind.

Then slowly did he lift the precious weight,
Yet lingered still. "Ah, must I go?" he said,
"Have I no heart to meet that unknown fate?
And must I lead the life that once I led,
Midst folk who will rejoice when I am dead;
Even as if they had not shared with me
The fear and longing of felicity?

"And yet indeed if I must live alone,
If fellowship be but an empty dream,
Is there not left a world that is mine own?
Am I not real, if all else doth but seem?
Yea, rather, with what wealth the world doth teem,
When we are once content from us to cast
The dreadful future and remorseful past."

A little while he lingered yet, and then
As fearful what he might be tempted to,
He hurried on until he reached again
The outer door, and, sighing, passed therethrough,
But still made haste to do what he must do,
And found the mule and cast on her the sack,
And took his way to that lone forest-track.

Mattock and spade with him too did he bear,
And dug a grave beneath the spreading tree
Whereby Firuz had died, and laid him there,
Thinking the while of all his misery,
And muttering still, "How could it hap to me?
Unless I died within a day or two
Surely some deed I soon should find to do."

But when the earth on him he 'gan to throw,
He said, "And shall I cast the key herein?
What need have I this woeful tale to know,
To vex me midst the fair life I shall win;
Why do I seek to probe my fellow's sin,
Who, living, saved my life from misery,
And dying, gave this fresh life unto me?"

He kept the key, his words he answered not,
But smoothed the earth above the mourner's head,
Then mounting, turned away from that sad spot,
Feverish with hope and change; bewilderéd,
And ever more oppressed with growing dread,
As through the dark and silent wood he rode,
And drew the nigher unto man's abode.

But when at last he met the broad sweet light
Upon the hill's brow where that wood had end,
And saw the open upland fresh and bright,
A thrill of joy that sight through him must send,
And with good heart he 'twixt the fields did wend,
And not so much of that sad house he thought
As of the wealthy life he thence had brought;

So amidst thoughts of pleasant life and ease,
Seemed all things fair that eve; the peasant's door,
The mother with the child upon her knees
Sitting within upon the shaded floor;
While 'neath the trellised gourd some maid sung o'er
Her lover to the rude lute's trembling strings,
Her brown breast heaving 'neath the silver rings;

The slender damsel coming from the well,
Smiling beneath the flashing brazen jar,
Her fellows left behind thereat, to tell
How weary of her smiles her lovers are;
While the small children round wage watery war
Till the thin linen more transparent grows,
And ruddy brown the flesh beneath it glows;

The trooper drinking at the homestead gate,
Telling wild lies about the sword and spear,
Unto the farmer striving to abate
The pedler's price; the village drawing near,
The smoke, that scenting the fresh eve, and clear,
Tells of the feast; the stithy's dying spark,
The barn's wealth dimly showing through the dark.

How sweet was all! how easy it should be
Amid such life one's self-made woes to bear!
He felt as one who, waked up suddenly
To life's delight, knows not of grief or care.
How kind, how lovesome, all the people were!
Why should he think of aught but love and bliss
With many years of such-like life as this?

Night came at last, and darker and more still
The world was, and the stars hung in the sky,
And as the road o'ertopped a sunburnt hill
He saw before him the great city lie,
The glimmering lights about grey towers and high,
Rising from gardens dark; the guarded wall,
The gleaming dykes, the great sea, bounding all.

As one who at the trumpet's sound casts by
The tender thought of rest, of wife and child,
And fear of death for hope of victory,
So at that sight those sweet vague hopes and wild
Did he cast by, and in the darkness smiled
For pleasure of the beauty of the earth,
For foretaste of the coming days of mirth.

SURELY if any man was blithe and glad
Within that city, when the morrow's sun
Beheld it, he at least the first place had,
And midst of glad folk was the happiest one—
So much to do, that was not e'en begun,
So much to hope for, that he could not see,
So much to win, so many things to be!

Yea, so much, he could turn himself to nought
For many days, but wandered aimlessly
Wherever men together might be brought;
That he once more their daily life might see,
That to his new-born life new seemed to be,
And staving thought off, he awhile must shrink
From touching that sweet cup he had to drink.

Yet when this mood was passed by, what was this,
That in the draught he was about to drain,
That new victorious life, all seemed amiss?
If, thinking of the pleasure and the pain,
Men find in struggling life, he turned to gain
The godlike joy he hoped to find therein,
All turned to cloud, and nought seemed left to win.

Love moved him not, yea, something in his heart
There was that made him shudder at its name;
He could not rouse himself to take his part
In ruling worlds and winning praise and blame;
And if vague hope of glory o'er him came,
Why should he cast himself against the spears
To make vain stories for the unpitying years?

The thing that men call knowledge helped him not;
And if he thought of the world's varying face,
And changing manners, then his heart waxed hot
For thinking of his journey to that place,
And how 'twixt him and it was little space.
Then back to listlessness once more he turned,
Quenching the flame that in his sick heart burned.

What thing was left him now, but only this,
A life of aimless ease and luxury,
That he must strive to think the promised bliss,
Where hoping not for aught that was not nigh,
Midst vain pretence he should but have to die,
But every minute longing to confess
That this was nought but utter weariness.

So to the foolish image of delight
That rich men worship, now he needs must cling
Despite himself, and pass by day and night
As friendless and unloved as any king;
Till he began to doubt of everything
Amidst that world of lies; till he began
To think of pain as very friend of man.

So passed the time, and though he felt the chain
That round about his wasting life was cast,
He still must think the labour all in vain
To strive to free himself while life should last,
And so, midst all, two weary years went past,
Nought done, save death a little brought anear,
The hard deliverance that he needs must fear.

At last one dawn, when all the place was still,
He took that key, and e'en as one might gaze
Upon the record of some little ill
That happed in past days, now grown happy days,
He eyed it, sighing, 'neath the young sun's rays;
And silently he passed his palace through,
Nor told himself what deed he had to do.

He reached the stable where his steeds were kept,
And midst the delicate-limbed beasts he found
The mule that o'er the forest grass had stepped;
Then, having on her back the saddle bound,
Entered the house again, and, looking round
The darkened banquet-chamber, caught away
What simple food the nighest to him lay.

Then, with the hand that rich men fawned upon,
The wicket he unlocked, and forth he led
His beast, and mounted when the street was won,
Wherein already folk for daily bread
Began to labour, who now turned the head
To whisper as the rich man passed them by
Betwixt the frails of fresh-plucked greenery.

He passed the wall where Firuz first he saw,
The hostel where the dead man gave him food;
He passed the gate and 'gan at last to draw
Unto the country bordering on the wood,
And still he took no thought of bad or good,
Or named his journey, nay, if he had met
A face he knew, he might have turned back yet.

But all the folk he saw were strange to him,
And, for all heed that unto them he gave,
Might have been nought; the reaper's bare brown limb,
The rich man's train with litter and armed slave,
The girl bare-footed in the stream's white wave—
Like empty shadows by his eyes they passed,
The world was narrowed to his heart at last.

He reached the hill, which e'en in that strange mood
Seemed grown familiar to him; with no pain
He found the path that pierced the tangled wood,
And midst its dusk he gave his mule the rein,
And in no long time reached the little plain,
And then indeed the world seemed left behind,
And no more now he felt confused and blind.

He cried aloud to see the white house rise
O'er the green garden and the long white wall,
Which erst the pale moon showed unto his eyes,
But on the stillness, strange his voice did fall,
For in the noon now woodland creatures all
Were resting 'neath the shadow of the trees,
Patient, unvexed by any memories.

How should he rest, who might have come too late?
O'er the burnt plain he hurried, and laid hand
Upon the rusted handle of the gate,
Not touched since he himself thereby did stand:
The warm and scented air his visage fanned,
And on his head down rained the blossoms' dust,
As back the heavy grass-choked door he thrust.

But ere upon the path grown green with weed
He set his foot, he paused a little while,
And of her gear his patient beast he freed,
And muttered, as he smiled a doubtful smile,
"Behold now if my troubles make me vile,
And I once more have will to herd with man,
Let me get back, then, even as I can."

There 'neath the tangled boughs he went apace,
Remembering him awhile of that sad cry,
That erst had been his welcome to that place,
That showed him first it might be good to die,
When he but thought of new delights anigh;
Thereat he shuddered now, bethinking him
In what a sea he cast himself to swim.

But his fate lay before him; on he went,
And through the gilded doors, now open wide,
He passed, and found the flowery hangings rent,
And past his feet did hissing serpents glide,
While from the hall wherein the mourners died
A grey wolf glared, and o'er his head the bat
Hung, and the paddock on the hearth-stone sat.

He loitered not amid those loathsome things,
That in the place which erst had been so fair,
Brought second death to fond imaginings
Of that sweet life, he once had hoped for there;
So with a troubled heart and full of care,
Though still with wild hopes stirring his hot blood,
He turned his face unto the dreary wood.

No less the pleasance felt its evil day;
The trellis, that had shut the forest trees
From the fair flowers, all torn and broken lay,
Though still the lily's scent was on the breeze,
And the rose clasped the broken images
Of kings and priests, and those they once had loved;
And in the scented bush the brown bird moved.

But with the choking weeds the tulip fought,
Paler and smaller than he had been erst,
The wind-flowers round the well, fair feet once sought,
Were trodden down by feet of beasts athirst;
The well-trained apricot its bonds had burst;
The wild-cat in the cherry-tree anear
Eyed the brown lynx that waited for the deer.

A little while upon the black wood's edge
Did Bharam eye the ruin mournfully,
Then turned and said, "I take it as a pledge
That I shall not come back again to die;
The mocking image of felicity
Awaited those poor souls that failed herein,
But I most surely death or life shall win."

Thus saying, through the wood he 'gan to go,
And kindlier its black loneliness did seem
Than all the fairness ruin brought so low;
So with good heart he reached the swift full stream,
And there, as in an old unfinished dream,
He stood amongst the mourners' graves, and saw
Past the small boat the eddies seaward draw.

Slowly, as one who thinks not of his deed,
He gat into the boat, and loosed from shore
And 'gan to row the ready shallop freed
Unto the landing cut beneath the door,
And in a little minute stood before

Its rusty leaves with beating heart, and hand
His wavering troubled will could scarce command.

But almost ere he willed it, was the key
Within the lock, and the great bolt sprang back,
The iron door swung open heavily,
And cold the wind rushed from a cavern black:
Then with one look upon the woodland track,
He stepped from out the fair light of the day,
Casting all hope of common life away.

For at his back the heavy door swung to,
Before him was thick darkness palpable;
And as he struggled further on to go,
With dizzied head upon the ground he fell,
And if he lived on yet, he scarce could tell,
Amid the phantoms new-born in that place
That past his eyes 'gan flit in endless race.

Fair women changing into shapeless things,
His own sad face mirrored, he knew not how;
And heavy wingless birds, and beasts with wings,
Strange stars, huge swirling seas, whose ebb and flow
Now seemed too swift for thought, now dull and slow:
Such things emmeshed his dying troubled thought,
Until his soul to sightless sleep was brought.

But when he woke to languid consciousness
Too well content he was therewith at first,
To ope his eyes, or seek what things might bless
His soul with rest from thought of good and worst,
And still his faint incurious ease he nursed,
Till nigh him rang a bird's note sweet and clear,
And stirred in him the seeds of hope and fear,

Withal the murmur of a quiet sea
He heard, and mingled sounds far off and sweet,
And o'er his head some rustling summer tree;
Slowly thereon he gat unto his feet,
And therewithal his sleep-dazed eyes did meet
The westering golden splendour of the sun,
For on that fair shore day was well-nigh done.

Then from the flashing sea and gleaming sky
Unto the green earth did he turn him round,
And saw a fair land sloping lazily
Up to a ridge of green with grey rocks crowned,
And on those slopes did fruitful trees abound,
And, cleaving them, came downward from the hill
In many a tinkling fall a little rill.

Now with his wakening senses, hunger too
Must needs awake, parched did his dry throat feel,
And hurrying, toward the little stream he drew,
And by a clear and sandy pool did kneel
And quenched his thirst, the while his hand did steal
Unto his wallet, where he thought to find
The bread he snatched from vain wealth left behind.

But when within his hand he held that bread,
Mouldy and perished as with many days,
He wondered much that he had not been dead,
And fell to think with measureless amaze
By what unheard-of, unimagined ways
Unto that lonely land he had been brought;
Until, bewildered in the maze of thought

That needs could lead nowhither, he arose
And from the fairest of those fruit-hung trees
The ripest and most luscious seeds he chose,
And staved his hunger off awhile with these;
Then 'twixt their trunks got back to where the breeze
Blew cool from off the calm sea, thinking still
That thence his fate must come for good or ill.

Thus, looking unto right and left, he passed
Over the green-sward, till he reached the strand,
And nought was 'twixt the sea and him at last,
Except a lessening belt of yellow sand.
There, looking seaward, he awhile did stand,
Until at last the great sun's nether rim,
Red with the sea-mist, in the sea 'gan swim.

But 'gainst it now a spot did he behold,
Nor knew if he were dazzled with the light,
Till as the orb sank and the sea grew cold,
Greater that grew beneath the gathering night,
And when all red was gone, and clear and bright
The high moon was, beneath its light he saw
A ship unto him o'er the waters draw.

Quickly his heart 'gan beat at sight of it,
But what that he could do could change his fate?
So calmly on the turf's edge did he sit
The coming of that unknown keel to wait,
That o'er the moonlit sea kept growing great,
Until at last the dashing oars he heard,
The creaking yard, the master's shouted word.

Then as the black hull 'neath the moonlight lay,
In the long swell, bright against side and oar,
A little shallop therefrom took its way
Unto the low line of the breakers hoar;
And when its keel was firm upon the shore
Two women stepped out thence, and 'gan to go
To Bharam's place with gentle steps and slow.

Then he arose, and wondering what should be
The end hereof, stood gazing at them there,
And even in that doubtful light could see
That they were lovesome damsels young and fair;
And as he watched their garlanded loose hair

And dainty flutter of their rich array,
Full many a hope about his heart 'gan play.

Now they drew nigh, and one of them began
In a sweet voice these hopeful words to say,
"Fear not, but come with us, O happy man,
Nor with thy doubts or questions make delay;
For this soft night gets ready such a day,
As shall thy heart for feeble pining blame,
And call thy hot desire a languid shame."

Therewith she turned again unto the sea,
As though she doubted not what he would do,
And Bharam followed after silently,
And went aboard the shallop with the two,
As one who dreams; and as the prow cleft through
The grey waves, sat beside them, pondering o'er
The days grown dim that led to that strange shore.

None spake to him, the mariners toiled on;
Silent the damsels sat, hand joined to hand,
Until the black sides of the ship were won;
Then folk hauled up the boat, his feet did stand
On the wide deck, the master gave command,
Back went the oars, and o'er the waters wan,
Unto the west 'neath sail and oar she ran.

All night they sailed, and when the dawn was nigh
And far astern the eastern sky grew bright,
A dark line seemed to cross the western sky
Afar and faint, and with the growing light
Another land began to heave in sight,
And when the lingering twilight was all done,
Grey cliffs they saw, made ruddy with the sun.

But when the shadow of their well-shaved mast
Had shortened that it no more touched the sea,
And well-nigh all the windy waste was past
That kept them from the land where they would be,
They turned about a ness, and 'neath their lee
A sandy-beached and green-banked haven lay,
For there a river cleft the mountains grey.

Thither they steered with no delay, and then
Upon the green slopes Bharam could behold
The white tents and the spears of many men,
And on the o'erhanging height a castle old,
And up the bay a ship o'erlaid with gold,
With golden sails and fluttering banners bright,
And silken awnings 'gainst the hot sun dight.

But underneath the tents, anigh that ship,
A space there was amidst of shadowing trees,
Well clad with turf down to the haven's lip;
And there, amongst the pasture of the bees,
Fanned by the long-drawn sweet-breathed ocean-breeze
Well canopied, was set a wondrous throne,
Amidst whose cushions sat a maid alone.

Crowned as a queen was she, and round her seat
Were damsels gathered, clad just in such guise
As those who on the sands did Bharam meet,
And stood beside him now, with lovesome eyes.
All this saw Bharam in no other wise
Than one might see a dream becoming true,
Nor had he thought of what he next should do.

Only those longings, vague and aimless erst,
Now quickened tenfold, found a cause and aim,
And on his soul a flood of light outburst,
That swallowed up in brightness of its flame
Strange thoughts of death, and hopes without a name,
For now he knew that love had led him on,
Until—until, perchance, the end was won.

Unto that presence straight the shipmen steered,
And as the white foam from the oars did fly,
And the black prow the daisied green-sward neared,
Uprose a song from that fair company,
Which those two damsels echoed murmuringly,
Bearing love-laden words unto his ears
On tender music, mother of sweet tears.

SONG.

O thou who drawest nigh across the sea,
O heart that seekest Love perpetually,
Nor know'st his name, come now at last to me!

Come, thirst of love thy lips too long have borne,
Hunger of love thy heart hath long outworn,
Speech hadst thou but to call thyself forlorn.

The seeker finds now, the parched lips are led
To sweet full streams, the hungry heart is fed,
And song springs up from moans of sorrow dead.

Draw nigh, draw nigh, and tell me all thy tale;
In words grown sweet since all the woe doth fail,
Show me wherewith thou didst thy woe bewail.

Draw nigh, draw nigh, beloved! think of these
That stand around as well-wrought images,
Earless and eyeless as these trembling trees.

I think the sky calls living none but three:
The God that looketh thence and thee and me;
And He made us, but we made Love to be.

Think not of time, then, for thou shalt not die
How soon soever shall the world go by,
And nought be left but God and thou and I.

And yet, O love, why makest thou delay?
Life comes not till thou comest, and the day
That knows no end may yet be cast away.

Such words the summer air swept past his ears,
Such words the lovesome maidens murmuréd,
With unabashed soft eyes made wet with tears,
As though for them the world were really dead,
As though indeed those tender words they said
Each to her love, and each her fingers moved,
As though she thought to meet the hands she loved.

But Bharam heeded not their lovesomeness,
As through his heart there shot one bitter thought
Of those dead mourners and their dead distress
That his own feet to such a land had brought,
But even ere the fear had come to nought,
The thought that made it, yea, all memory
Of what had been, had utterly passed by.

But when the song was done, and on the strand
The bark's prow grated, and the maidens twain
In low words bade him follow them aland,
Still, mid the certain hope of boundless gain,
About him clung the seeming-causeless pain
Of that past thought, that love had driven away,
The dreary teaching of a hopeless day.

And as unto the throne he drew anigh
He tried to say unto himself, "Alas!
Why am I full of such felicity?
How know I that for me the music was?
How know I yet what thing will come to pass?
How know I that my heart can bear the best,
Vain foolish heart that knew but little rest?"

A moment more and toward that golden ship
His face was turned, a hand was holding his;
His eyes with happy tears were wet, his lip
Still thrilled with memory of a loving kiss,
His eager ears drank in melodious bliss
Past words to tell of; joy was born at last,
Surely the bitterness of death was past.

How can I give her image unto you,
Clad in that raiment wonderful and fair?
Whatneed? Be sure that love's eye pierceth through
What web soever hides the beauty there—
To tell her fairness? Measure forth the air,
And weigh the wind, and portion out the sun!
This still is left, less easy to be done.

Into the golden ship now passed the twain,
The maidens followed, and the soldiers moved
Their ordered ranks, the shoreward road to gain;
The minstrels played what tunes the best behoved,
While in the stern the lover and beloved
Had nought to do but each on each to gaze,
Without a thought of past or coming days.

Up stream the gold prow pointed, the long oars
Broke into curves of white the swirling green,
On each side opened out the changing shores;
So lovely there were all things to be seen,
That in the golden age they might have been;
But rather had he gaze upon those eyes
Than see the whole world freed from miseries.

Sometimes she said, "And this, O love, is thine
As thou art mine. Look forth thy land to see!"
But he looked not, but rather would entwine
His fingers in her fingers amorously,
And answer, "Yea, and that one day shall be
When thou shalt go upon the blossoms sweet,
And I must look thereon to see thy feet!"

Now the stream narrowed, and the country girls
Thronged on the banks to see the Queen go by,
And cast fresh flowers upon the weedy swirls.
"Look forth! they sing to our felicity!"
The Queen said, "And the city draweth nigh."
"Nay, nay," said Bharam, "I will look on them
When they shall kneel to kiss thy garment's hem."

Now far ahead, above dark banks of trees
Could they behold the city's high white wall,
And, as they neared it, on the summer breeze
Was borne the tumult of the festival;
And when that sound on Bharam's ears did fall,
He cried, "Ah, will they lengthen out the day,
E'en when kind night has drawn the sun away?"

She sighed and said, "Nay now, be glad, O king,
That thou art coming to thy very own;
Nor one day shalt thou think it a small thing
That thou therein mayst wear the royal crown,
When somewhat weary thou at last art grown,
Through lapse of days, of this, and this, and this—
That something more is left thee than a kiss."

He stared at her wide eyes as one who heard,
Yet knew not what the words might signify,
Then said, "And think'st thou I shall be afeard
To slay myself before our love goes by,
That changed by death, if we indeed can die,
Unwearied by this anxious, earthy frame,
I still may think of thee, and know no shame?"

She gazed upon his flushed face tenderly,
Reddening herself for love, but said not aught,
Only her bosom heaved with one soft sigh,
And some unravelled maze of troublous thought
Unbidden tears unto her sweet eyes brought;
And he forgot that shade of bitterness
When such a look his yearning heart did bless.

Thereat the silver trumpet's tuneful blare
Made music strange unto his lovesome dream,
For now before them lay the city fair,
With high white bridges spanning the swift stream,
And bridge and shore with wealth of gold did gleam.
From a great multitude shout followed shout,
And high in air the sound of bells leapt out.

And then the shipmen furled the golden sail—
Slowly the red oars o'er the stream did skim,
As 'twixt the houses the light wind 'gan fail,
Till by a palace on the river's brim,
Whose towering height made half the bells grow dim,
The golden ship was stayed, for they had come
Unto the happy seeker's wondrous home.

"Look up and wonder, well-beloved," she said,
As now they rose to go unto the shore,
"At what the men did for us who are dead,
And praise them for the depth of their past lore,
And thank them though their life is long past o'er.
If they had known that all these things should be
How better had they wrought for thee and me?"

Gravely she looked into his eager eyes,
That turned unto the house a little while,
But took small heed of all the phantasies
Wherewith those men their trouble did beguile;
Though calmly did the vast front seem to smile,
From all its breadth of beauty looking down
Upon the tumult of the joyous town.

Again she sighed, but passed on silently,
And o'er the golden gangway went the twain
Unto the gold shade of the doorway high,
Treading on golden cloths, betwixt a lane
Of girls who each had been a kingdom's bane
In toiling, troubled lands, where loveliness
In scanty measure longing men doth bless.

One moment, and the threshold Bharam passed,
And that desire his heart was set upon
Yet would not name, his heart hath won at last.
Ah, if the end of all thereby were won!
For though, indeed, the noontide sun hath shone,
And all the clouds are scattered, who can say
What clouds shall curse the latter end of day?

THE days passed—growing sweeter as the year
Declined through autumn into winter-tide;
Perchance: for though no day could be so dear
As that whereon he first had seen his bride,
Yet still no less did love with him abide,
Tempered with quiet days and restfulness;
Desire fulfilled, renewed, his life did bless.

And thereto now were added other joys,
Her gifts indeed, unmeet for him to scorn:
The judgment-seat, the tourney's glorious noise,
The council wherein were the wise laws born;
Sweet tales of lovers vanquished and forlorn,
To make bliss greater than these lovers met,
Silent, alone, all troubles to forget—

All troubles to forget—the winter went,
Spring came, and love seemed worthier therewith weighed;
The summer came, and brought no discontent,
Nor yet with autumn's fading did love fade;
And the cold winter love the warmer made.
—So Bharam said, when round his love he clung,
And lonely, still such words were on his tongue.

At last from this and that (it boots not now
To tell the why and wherefore of the thing),
Great war and strife with other lands did grow,
And weeping she around his neck must cling,
Bidding him look for such a welcoming
When he came back again, as should outdo
The day that made one heart and life of two.

Nor did this fail: tried at all points was he;
He met the foe, and, beaten back with shame,
Snatched from victorious hands the victory,
And, winner of a great and godlike name,
Sighing with love, back to his love he came,
Worthy of love and changed by love indeed,
And with most glorious love to be his meed.

—Ah, changed by love—the fickle careless earth
The deeds of men, the troubles that they had,
That in first love he held of little worth,
Now like a well-told tale would make him glad,
And nought therein to him seemed lost or bad;
"And love," he said, "my joyous life doth bound,
E'en as the sea some fair isle flows around."

—"Love flows around"—alas, as time went on
Some strong career of striving would he stay,
And falter e'en at point of victory won,
And well-nigh cast the longed-for thing away:
"Nay, let me think of love," then would he say.

"Ah, I have swerved from singleness of heart,
Let me return, nor in these things have part."

"Let me return"—but, ah, what thing was this?
That in his love's arms he would feel the sting
Of vain desire, and ne'er-accomplished bliss.
—At whiles, indeed—for he had strength to fling
All thought away, and to his love to cling.
—At least as yet, and still he seemed to be
Dowered with the depth of all felicity.

So passed the time, till he two years had been
Living that joyous life in that fair land,
When on a day there came to him the Queen,
And said: "Fair love, all folk bow 'neath the hand
Of this or that; and I, at the command
Of one whose will I dare not disobey,
Must leave thee lonely till the hundredth day.

"Nay, now, forbear to ask me why I go!
Thou know'st all things are thine that I have got,
Nathless this one thing never shalt thou know,
Unless the love grow cold that once was hot
And thou art grown aweary of thy lot.
Ah, love, forgive me! for thy kiss is sweet,
As cool fresh streams to bruised and weary feet.

"Yet one more word; the room where thou and I
Were left alone that day of all sweet days;
Enter it not, till that time is passed by
I told thee of, and many weary ways
My feet have worn, to meet thy loving gaze;
For surely as thy foot therein shall tread,
Thou unto me, as I to thee, art dead.

"And yet, for fear of base and prying folk,
Needs must thou bear about that chamber's key.
Ah, love, farewell! no hard or troublous yoke
Thou hast to bear, nor have I doubt of thee.
For all the stream of tears that thou dost see,
They are love's offspring only; for my heart
Yet more than heretofore in thine has part."

Thus did she go, and he so left behind,
Mourned for her and desired her very sore;
Yet, with a pang, he felt that he was blind,
Despite of words, that yet there was a store
Of some undreamed-of and victorious lore
He might not touch—frowning he turned away,
And seemed a troubled, gloomy man that day.

Yet loyally for many days he dwelt
Within that house, or from his golden throne
Good justice to the thronging people dealt;
But when night came, and he was left alone,
Then all that splendour scarcely seemed his own,
And when he fell to thinking of his love,
He 'gan to wish that he his heart might prove.

In agony he strove to cast from him
Fresh doubts of what she was, and all his tale
Rose up once more, now vague indeed and dim,
Yet worse therefor perchance—if he should fail,
And in some half-remembered hell go wail
His happy lot, the days that might have been!
Was she his bane?—his life, his love, his queen.

Then would he image forth her body fair,
And limb by limb would set before his eyes
Her loveliness as he had seen it there;
Then cry, "Why think of these vain mysteries
When still ahead such happy life there lies?
And yet and yet, this that doth so outshine
All other beauty, is it wholly mine?

"How can it change, that throne of loveliness?
How can it change—but I grow old and die.
Perchance some other heart those eyes shall bless,
Some other head upon that bosom lie,
When all that once I was is long gone by:
And now—what memory through my mind has passed
Of men from some strange heaven of love outcast?

"Who knows but in that chamber I may find
The clue unto this tangled, weary maze,
And vision clear, whereas I now am blind,
And endless love instead of anxious days—
A glorious end to all these dark strange ways?
Perchance those words she did but say to me,
To try my heart—did she not give the key?"

So passed the days, and sometimes would he strive
To think of nothing but her dear return,
And midst of kingly deeds would think to live,
But then again full oft his heart would burn
The uttermost of all the thing to learn;
Love failed him not, but baneful jealousy
Had scaled his golden throne and sat thereby.

Now he began to wander nigh the door,
And draw from out its place the golden key,
And curse the gift, and wish the days passed o'er,
Till in his arms his love once more should be;
Yet still he dreaded what his eyes should see
In those familiar and belovéd eyes,
Changed now perchance in some unlooked-for wise.

At last a day came: on the morn of it
Did he arise from haggard dreamful sleep,
And on the throne of justice did he sit,
In troublous outward things his soul to steep;
Then, armed, upon his war-horse did he leap,

And in the lists right eagerly did play,
As one who every care hath cast away.

Then came the evening banquet, and he sat
To which the dancers' gold-adorned feet,
And with his great men talked of this and that,
Then rose, with gold a minstrel-man to greet,
Then listened to his pensive song and sweet
With serious eyes, and still in everything
He seemed an unrebuked and glorious king.

But at the dead of night was he alone
Once more, once more within his wavering heart
Strange thought against confusèd thought was thrown,
Nor knew he how real life from dreams to part,
All seemed to him a picture made by art,
Except the overwhelming strong desire
To know the end, that set his heart afire.

Dawn found him thus; then he arose from bed,
He kissed her picture hanging on the wall,
The linen things that veiled her goodlihead
From all but him, and still, like bitterest gall,
A thought rose up within him therewithal,
And strangely was his heart confused with fears
That checked the rise of tender, loving tears.

He gat the golden key into his hand,
And once more had a glimmering memory
Of how just so he once before did stand,
Ready another golden key to try;
Then murmured he, "Gat I not bliss thereby?
Unless all this is such a gleam of thought,
That to a man's mind sometimes will be brought.

"Of how he lived before, he knows not where."
So saying from the chamber did he pass,
And went a long way down a cloister fair,
And o'er a little pleasance of green grass,
Until anigh the very door he was
That hid that mystery from him; there he stayed,
And in his hand the golden key he weighed.

There stood he, trying hard to think thereof,
The better and the worse, how all would be
If he should do the deed; but thought would move
From this thing unto that confusedly,
And neither past nor future could he see,
Nay scarce could say of what thing then he thought,
Such fever now the fierce desire had wrought.

Not long he lingered, in the lock he set
The golden key, as one constrained thereto,
And thrust the door back, and with scared eyes met
The lovely chamber that so well he knew,
And therein still was all in order due,
No deathlike image seared his wondering eyes,
No strange sound smote his ears with ill surprise.

He sighed, and smiled, as one would say, "Ah, why
Have I feared this, wherein was nought to fear,
Wrapping familiar things in mystery?"
And even therewithal did he draw near
To well-remembered things his soul held dear,
Gazing at all those matters one by one,
That told of sweet things there in past days done.

There in the grey light were the hangings fair,
No figure in them changed now any whit,
The marble floor half hid with carpets rare
E'en as when first he saw her feet on it,
A grey moth's whirring wings indeed did flit
Across the fair bed's gleaming canopy,
But yet no other change had passed thereby.

And by the bed upon the floor there lay
Soft raiment of his love, as though that she
Had there unclad her, ere she went away.
He stopped and touched the fair things tenderly,
And love swept over him as some grey sea
Sweeps o'er the dry shells of a sandy bank,
And with dry lips his own salt tears he drank.

He rose within a while, and turned about
Unto the door, and said, "Three days it is
Before she comes to take away all doubt
And wrap my soul again in utter bliss;
I will depart, that she may smile at this,
Giving the pity and forgiveness due
Unto a heart whose feebleness she knew.

Therewith he turned to go, but even then,
Upon a little table nigh his hand,
Beheld a cup, the work of cunning men
For many a long year vanished from the land,
And up against it did a tablet stand,
Whereon were gleaming letters writ in gold;
Then breathlessly these things did he behold;

For never had his eyes beheld them erst,
And well he deemed the secret lay therein;
Trembling, he said, "This cup may quench my thirst;
Fair rest from this strange tablet may I win,
And if I sin she will forgive my sin;
Nay, rather since her word I disobey
In entering here, no heavier this will weigh."

Withal he took the tablet, and he read:
"O thou who, venturing much, hast gained so much,
Drink of this cup, and be remembered
When all are gone whose feet the green earth touch:

Dull is the labouring world, nor holdeth such
As think and yet are happy; then be bold,
And things unthought of shall thine eyes behold!

"Yea, thou must drink, for if thou drinkest not
Nor soundest all the depths of this hid thing,
Think'st thou that these my words can be forgot,
How close soever thou to love mayst cling,
How much soever thou art still a king?
Drink then, and take what thou hast fairly won,
For make no doubt that thine old life is done."

He took the cup and round about the bowl
Beheld strange figures carved, strange letters writ,
But mid the hurrying tumult of his soul,
He of their meaning then could make no whit,
Though afterwards their smallest lines would flit
Before his eyes, in times that came to him
When many a greater matter had grown dim.

So with closed eyes he drank, and once again,
While on his quivering lip the sweet draught hung
Did he think dimly of those mourning men
And saw them winding the dark trees among,
And in his ears their doleful wailing rung;
His love and all the glories of his home
E'en in that minute shadows had become.

E'en in that minute; though at first indeed
In one quick flash of pain unbearable,
His love, his queen, made bare of any weed,
Seemed standing there, as though some tale to tell
From opened lips; and then a dark veil fell
O'er all things there, a chill and restless breeze
Seemed moaning through innumerable trees.

Yet still he staggered onwards to the door
With arms outspread, as one who in dark night
Wanders through places he has known before;
Wide open were his eyes that had no sight,
And with a feverish flush his cheeks were bright,
His lips moved, some unspoken words to say,
As, sinking down, across the door he lay.

WHAT strange confused dreams swept through his sleep!
What fights he fought, nor knew with whom or why;
How piteously for nothing he must weep,
For what inane rewards he still must try
To pierce the inner earth or scale the sky!
What faces long forgot rose up to him!
On what a sea of unrest did he swim!

He woke; the wind blew cold upon his face,
The sound of swirling waters smote his ear,
Through the deep quiet of some lonely place;
Shuddering with horror at what might be near,
He closed his dazzled eyes again for fear,
Ere they had seen aught but the light of day
And formless things against it, black and grey.

Trembling awhile he lay, and scarcely knew
Why he was sick with fear, but when at last
His wretched soul unto his body drew,
And somewhat he could think about the past,
As one might wake to hell, around he cast
A haggard glance, and saw before him there
A grey cliff rising high into the air

Across a deep swift river, and the door
Shut fast against him, did he see therein,
Wherethrough with trembling steps he passed before
That happy life above all lives to win,
And round about him the sharp grass and thin,
Covered low mounds that here and there arose,
For to his head his forerunners were close.

Then with changed voice he moaned and to his feet
Slowly he gat, and 'twixt the tree-boles grey
He 'gan to go, and tender words and sweet
Were in his ears, the promise of a day
When he should cast all troublous thoughts away.
He stopped, and turned his face unto the trees
To hearken to the moaning of the breeze;

Because it seemed well-nigh articulate;
He cried aloud, "Come back, come back to me!"
If yet the echo of the fearful gate
Had any sound to help his misery;
He shut his eyes, lest he perchance might be
Caught by some fearful dream within a dream,
That he might wake up to his gold bed's gleam.

Voiceless the wind was, the grey cliff was dumb,
His eyes could show him nought but that same place
Whereto in days of hope his feet had come;
He cast himself adown, and hid his face
Within the grass, and heeding no disgrace,
Howled beastlike, till his voice grew hoarse and dim,
And little life indeed seemed left in him.

Then in a while he rose and tottered on
Adown that path, scarce knowing what had been
Or why his woe was such, until he won
To where had been of old the pleasance green,
Whose beauty, whose decay he erst had seen
That now indeed a tangled waste had grown,
Whose first estate scarce any man had known.

Roofless above it then he saw the house,
Whose vanished loveliness his heart had filled

With fresh luxurious longings amorous,
And thitherward, though thus he scarcely willed,
His feet must stray to see the wild bird build
Her nest within the chambers, once made bright,
To house the delicate givers of delight.

And now the first rage of his grief being o'er,
Madness was past, though pain was greater still,
And he remembered well the days of yore,
And how his great desire made all things ill,
And aye with restlessness his life did fill;
Too hard to bear that he must cast away
Honour and wealth, to reach e'en such a day!

Now in the hall upon that bench of stone,
Where erst the mourners used to sit, he sat,
Striving to think of all that he had done
Before his heart's unnamed desire he gat,
Striving to hope that still in this or that
He might take pleasure yet before he died,
That the hard days a little joy might hide.

He moaned to think that he had cast away
All hope of quiet life then, when his hand
Was on the key 'neath that high cliff and grey,
And looking backward he awhile did stand—
Needs must he deem him worse than that sad band
Who therein erst their wretched lives outwore,
However great the burden that they bore.

For they, he said, had somewhat left of rest,
Since in that place indeed they could abide,
But on his heart the weight of woe so pressed
That he his wretched head could never hide,
But needs must wander forth until he died—
Ah God, more full of horror seemed that place,
Than the world's curious eyes upon his face.

For there he seemed to sleep that he might dream
The worst of dreams,—he seemed to be awake,
That through them all might pierce no hopeful gleam,
That he the fearful chain might never break;
And shameful images his eyes must make
That shuddering he must call by his love's name,
And on his lips must gather words of shame.

Midst this, I say, what will was left to him,
Still urged him unto men's abodes again,
So that he rose, and though his eyes were dim
With misery, he crossed the sunburnt plain,
And as one walks in sleep, with little pain
He pierced the forest through, and came once more
Unto the hill that looked the uplands o'er.

Fierce was the summer sun of that bright day,
When on the upland road he set his feet,
And man and beast within the shadow lay
And rested, but no rest to him was sweet
That he could gain, and when the hot sun beat
Upon his head as from the wood he passed,
Nought noted he that flame upon him cast.

At end of day he reached the city gate,
And now no more he moaned, his eyes were dry;
Shut in his body's bonds, his soul would wait,
The utmost term of all its misery,
Nor hope for any ease, nor pray to die.
Some poor abode within that city fair
He gat himself, and passed the long days there.

But now and then men saw him on the quays,
Gazing on busy scenes he heeded nought,
Or passing through the crowd on festal days,
Or in some net of merry children caught,
And when they saw his dreamy eyes distraught,
His changeless face drawn with that hidden pain,
They said, "THE MAN WHO NE'ER SHALL LAUGH AGAIN."

Ah, these, with life so done with now, might deem
That better is it resting in a dream,
Yea, e'en a dull dream, than with outstretched hand,
And wild eyes, face to face with life to stand,
No more the master now of anything,
Through striving of all things to be the king—
Than waking in a hard taskmaster's grasp
Because we strove the unsullied joy to clasp—
Than just to find our hearts the world, as we
Still thought we were and ever longed to be,
To find nought real except ourselves, and find
All care for all things scattered to the wind,
Scarce in our hearts the very pain alive.
Compelled to breathe indeed, compelled to strive,
Compelled to fear, yet not allowed to hope—
For e'en as men laid on a flowery slope
'Twixt inaccessible cliffs and unsailed sea,
Painless, and waiting for eternity
That will not harm, were these old men now grown.
The seed of unrest, that their hearts had sown,
Sprung up, and garnered, and consumed, had left
Nought that from out their treasure might be reft;
All was a picture in these latter days,
That had been once, and they might sit and praise
The calm, wise heart that knoweth how to rest,
The man too kind to snatch out at the best,
Since he is part of all, each thing a part,
Beloved alike of his wide-loving heart.

Ah, how the night-wind raved, and wind and sea
Clashed wildly in their useless agony,
But dulled not or made weak the minstrel's song
That through the hall bemocked the lost year's wrong.

NOVEMBER.

ARE thine eyes weary? is thy heart too sick
To struggle any more with doubt and thought,
Whose formless veil draws darkening now and thick
Across thee, e'en as smoke-tinged mist-wreaths brought
Down a fair dale to make it blind and nought?
Art thou so weary that no world there seems
Beyond these four walls, hung with pain and dreams?

Look out upon the real world, where the moon,
Half-way 'twixt root and crown of these high trees,
Turns the dead midnight into dreamy noon,
Silent and full of wonders, for the breeze
Died at the sunset, and no images,
No hopes of day, are left in sky or earth—
Is it not fair, and of most wondrous worth?

Yea, I have looked, and seen November there;
The changeless seal of change it seemed to be,
Fair death of things that, living once, were fair;
Bright sign of loneliness too great for me,
Strange image of the dread eternity,
In whose void patience how can these have part,
These outstretched feverish hands, this restless heart?

ON a clear eve, when the November sky
Grew red with promise of the hoar-frost nigh,
These ancient men turned from the outside cold,
With something like content that they, grown old,
Needed but little now to help the ease
Of those last days before the final peace.
The empty month for them left no regret
For sweet things gained and lost, and longed for yet,
'Twixt spring-tide and this dying of the year.
Few things of small account the whole did bear,
Nor like a long lifetime of misery
Those few days seemed, as oft to such may be
As, seeing the patience of the world, whereby
Midst all its strife it falls not utterly
Into a wild, confused mass of pain,
Yet note it not, and have no will to gain,
Since they are young, a little time of rest,
Midst their vain raging for the hopeless best.

Such thought, perchance, was in his heart, who broke
The silence of the fireside now, and spoke;
"This eve my tale tells of a fair maid born
Within a peaceful land, that peace to scorn,
In turn to scorn the deeds of mighty kings,
The counsel of the wise, and far-famed things,
And envied lives; so, born for discontent,
She through the eager world of base folk went,
Still gaining nought but heavier weariness.
God grant that somewhere now content may bless
Her yearning heart; that she may look and smile
On the strange earth that wearied her awhile,
And now forgets her! Yet so do not we,
Though some of us have lived full happily!"

THE STORY OF RHODOPE.

ARGUMENT.

There was in a poor land a certain maid, lowly but exceeding beautiful, who, by a strange hap, was drawn from her low estate, and became a queen and the world's wonder.

A GRECIAN-SPEAKING folk there dwelt of yore,
Whose name my tale remembers not, between
The snow-topped mountains and the sea-beat shore,
Upon a strip of plain, and upland green,
Where seldom was the worst of summer seen,
And seldom the last bond of winter's cold;
Easy was life 'twixt garden, field, and fold.

My tale says these dealt little with the sea,
But for the mullet's flushed vermilion,
And weight o' the tunny: and what things might be
Behind the snowy tops but moon and sun
They knew not, nor as yet had any one
Sunk shaft in hill-side there, or dried the stream
To see if 'neath its sand gold specks might gleam.

Yet rich enow they were; deep-uddered kine
Went lowing towards the pails at eventide;
The sheep cropped close unto the well-fenced vine,
Whose clusters hung upon the southering side
Of the fair hill; the brown plain far and wide
Changed year by year through green to hoary gold;
And the unherded, moaning bees untold,

Blind-eyed to aught but blossoms, ranged the land,
Working for others; and the clacking loom
Not long within the homestead still did stand;
The spindles twirled within the women's room,
And oft amidst the depth of winter's gloom,
From off the poplar-block white chips would fly
'Neath some deft hand, watched of the standers-by.

Sometimes too would the foreign chapmen come,
And beach their dromond in the sandy bay,
And then the women-folk from many a home,
With heavy-laden beasts would take their way,
And round the black-keeled ship expend the day,
And by the moon would come back, light enow,
With things soon told, for that rough wealth to show.

Therefore of delicate array, full oft
Small lack there was in coffers of that land,
And gold would shine on shoulders smooth and soft,
And sparklike gems glitter from many a hand,
And by the altar would the goodman stand
Upon the solemn days of sacrifice,
Clad in attire of no such wretched price.

But the next morn the yellow-headed girls
Would be afield, or 'twixt the vine-rows green,
And on the goodman's forehead would no pearls,
But rather sun-drawn beaded drops be seen,
As the bright share carved out the furrow clean,
Or the thick swath fell 'neath the sturdy stroke:
For all must labour midst that simple folk.

Now, in a land where few were poor, if none
Were lordly rich, a certain man abode,
Who poorer was perchance than any one
That ruled a house; yea, somewhat of a load
Of fears he bare adown life's latter road,
For, touching now upon his sixtieth year,
His wealth still waned, and still his house grew bare.

Why this should be none knew, for he was deft
In all the simple craft of that fair land,
Plough-stilt, and spade, and sickle, and axe-heft,
As much as need be pressed his hardened hand,
And creeping wanhope still did he withstand;
Wedded he was, and his grey helpmate too
Was skilled in all, and ever wrought her due.

Yet did his goods decrease: at end of dry
He cut his hay, to lie long in the rain;

And timorous must he let the time go by
For vintaging; and August came in vain
To his thin wheat; his sheep of wolves were slain;
Lame went his horses, barren were his kine,
His slaughtering-stock before the knife would pine.

All this befell him more than most I say,
And yet he lived on; gifts were plenty there,
The rich man's wealth but seldom hoarded lay;
And at a close-fist would the people stare,
And point the finger as at something rare—
Yet ever giving is a burden still,
And fast our goodman trundled down the hill.

Not always though had fortune served him thus,
In earlier days rich had he been and great,
But had no chick or child to bless his house,
And much did it mislike him of his fate,
And early to the Gods he prayed and late,
To give him that if all they took besides,
As to fate's feet will blind men still be guides.

So on a day when more than twenty years
Of childless wedlock had oppressed his wife,
She spake to him with smiles and happy tears;
And said, "Be glad, for ended is the strife
Betwixt us and the Gods, and our old life
Shall be renewed to us; the blossom clings
Unto the bough long barren, the waste sings."

Joyful he was at those glad words, and went
A changed man through his homestead on that morn,
And on fair things stored up he stared intent,
And hugged himself on things he erst did scorn,
When life seemed quickly ended and forlorn.
And so the days passed, till the time was come
When a new voice should wail on its cold home

March was it, but a foretaste of the June
The earth had, and the budding linden-grove
About the homestead, with the brown bird's tune
Was happy, and the faint blue sky above
The black-thorn blossoms made meet roof for love,
For though the south wind breathed a thought of rain,
No cloud as yet its golden breadth did stain.

That afternoon within his well-hung hall,
Amidst of many thoughts the goodman lay
Until a gentle sleep on him 'gan fall,
And he began to dream; but the sweet day
The dream forgat not, nor could wipe away
The pictures of his home, that seemed so good;
For midst his garden in his dream he stood;

Hand in hand with his wife he seemed to be,
And both their eyes were lovingly intent
Upon a little blossom fair to see
Before their feet, that through the fresh air sent
Sweet odours; but as over it they bent,
The day seemed changed to cloudiness and rain,
And the sweet flower, whereof they were so fain,

Was grown a goodly sapling, and they gazed
Wondering thereat, but loved it nothing less.
But as they looked a bright flame round it blazed,
And hid it for a space, and weariness
The souls of both the good folk did oppress,
And on the earth they lay down side by side,
And unto them it was as they had died.

Yet did they know that o'er them hung the tree
Grown mighty, thick-leaved; on each bough did hang
Crown, sword, or ship, or temple fair to see;
And therewithal a great wind through it sang,
And trumpet blast there was; and armour rang
Amid that leafy world, and now and then
Strange songs were sung in tongues of outland men.

Amid these sounds the goodman heard at last
A song in his own tongue, and sat upright
And blinking at the broad bright sun that cast
A straight beam through the window, making bright
The dusky hangings; till his gathering sight
Showed him outside two damsels, pail on head,
Who went by, singing, to the milking-shed.

And meeting them with jingling bit and trace
Came the grey team from field; a merry lad
Sat sideways on the foremost, broad of face,
Freckled and flaxen-haired, whose red lips had
A primrose 'twixt them, yet still blithe and glad,
With muffled whistle, swinging, did he mock
The maidens' song and the brown throstle-cock.

Then rose the goodman, happy, for his dream
Seemed nowise ill to think on; rather he
Some echo of his hopes the thing did deem
If hardly any certain prophecy
Of happy things in time to come to be;
And into the March sun he wandered forth,
With life and wealth all grown of double worth.

From barn to well-stocked field he went that eve,
Smiling on all, and wondering how it was
That any one in such a world might grieve,
At least for long, at what might come to pass;
The soft south-wind, the flowers amid the grass,
The fragrant earth, the sweet sounds everywhere,
Seemed gifts too great almost for man to bear.

Long wandered he, the happiest of all men
Till day was gone, and the white moon and high
Cast a long shadow on the white stones, when
He came once more his homestead door anigh;
And there a girl stood watching, and a cry
Burst from her lips when she beheld him come;
She said, "O welcome to thy twice-blessed home!

"Thy wife hath borne to thee a maiden fair,
Come and behold it, and give thanks withal
Unto the gods, who thus have heard thy prayer."
Sweetly that voice upon his ears did fall,
'Twixt him and utter bliss no bounding wall
Seemed raised now, nor did end of life seem nigh;
Once more he had forgot that he must die.

So on the morrow high feast did he hold,
And all the guests with gifts were satisfied,
And gladdened were the gods of field and fold,
With many a beast that at their altars died.
How should the spring of all that wealth be dried?
Nought did he deal with untried things or strange,
'Twixt year and year how might the seasons change?

Well, by next year, grown had the child and thriven
Unto his heart's desire, and in his hall
Again was high feast held, and good gifts given
To the departing guests; yet did it fall
That somewhat his goods minished therewithal,
But little grief it gave him; "Ah, let be,
This year will raise the scale once more," said he.

But as the time passed, with the child's increase
Did ill luck grow apace, till field by field
Fell his lands from him; nought he knew of ease,
Yet little good-hap did his trouble yield;
The Gods belike a new bag had unsealed
Of hopeless longing for him, and his day
Mid restless yearning still must pass away.

So things went on, till June of that same year
Whereof I tell, when nineteen May-tides green
The maid had looked on, and was grown so fair
That never yet the like of her had been
Within that land; and her divine soft mien,
Her eyes and her soft speech, now blessed alone
A house wherefrom all fair things else were gone.

Yet who so gloomed thereat, not she it was
Who with her grave set face and heart unmoved,
Watched, wearied not, nor pleased, each new day pass;
Nor thought of change, she said. As well behoved,
By many men ere now was she beloved;
Wild words she oft had heard, and harder grown
At bitter tears about her fair feet strown.

For far apart from these she seemed to be,
Their joys and sorrows moved her not, and they
Looked upon her as some divinity,
And cursed her not, though whiles she seemed to lay
A curse on them unwitting, and the day
Seemed grown unhappy, useless, as she came
With eyes fulfilled of thoughts of life and shame

Across their simple merriment. Meanwhile
She laboured as need was, nor heeded aught
What thing she did, nor yet did aught seem vile
More than another that the long day brought
Unto her hands; and as her father fought
Against his bitter foe, she watched it all
As though in some strange play the thing did fall.

And he, who loved her yet amidst of fear,
Would look upon her, wondering, even as though
He, daring not her soul to draw anear,
Yet of her hopes and fears was fain to know;
Was fain to hope that she one day would show
In what wise he within her heart was borne;
Yea, if that day he found in her but scorn.

It fell then in the June-tide, mid these things,
That on an eve within the bare great hall,
When nigh the window the bat's flickering wings
Were brushing, and the soft dew fast did fall,
And o'er the ferry far away did call
The homeward-hastening traveller, that the three
Sat resting in that soft obscurity.

Some tale belike unto the other two
The goodman had been telling, for he said,
"Well, in the end no more the thieves might do,
For when enough of them were hurt or dead
Needs must they cry for quarter; by Jove's head,
That parley as sweet music did I hear,
Who for three hours had seen grim death anear.

"So then their tall ship did we take in tow,
And beached her in the bay with no small pain.
The painted dragon-head, that ye note now
Grin at Jove's temple-door with gapings vain,
And her steel beaks the merchant-galleys' bane,
We smote away; with every second oar
We roofed that house of refuge nigh the shore.

"Then fell we unto ransacking her hold,
And left them store of meal, but took away
Armour, fair cloths, and silver things and gold,
Rich raiment, wine and honey; then we lay
Upon the beach that latter end of day,

And shared the spoil by drawing short and long—
That was before my fate 'gan do me wrong,

"And good things gat I; two such casks of wine,
And such a jar of honey, as would make
The very Gods smile, had they come to dine
E'en in this bare hall; ah! my heart doth ache,
Rhodope, O my daughter! for thy sake,
When of the gold-sewn purple robe I tell
That certes now had matched thy beauty well.

"What else? a crested helm all golden wrought,
A bow and sheaf of arrows—there they hang
Since they with one thing else came not to nought
Of all the things o'er which the goodwife sang,
When on the threshold first my spear-butt rang,
And o'er the bay the terror of the sea
With clipped wings laboured slow and painfully.

"Take down the bow, goodwife; a thing of price
Though unadorned; therefore it yet bides here;
For trusty is it in the wood, and wise
The long shafts are to find the dappled deer
And mend our four days' fast with better cheer.
But for the other thing—the twilight fails
Amid these half-remembered woeful tales;

"So light the taper for a little while
To see a marvel." Therewith speedily
The goodwife turned, the candle showed her smile,
And eyes upon Rhodope fixed, that she
Perchance in her some eagerness might see;
But on the brightening stars her wide eyes stared
E'en when the taper through the darkness glared.

Then to the great chest did the goodman go,
And turning o'er the coarser household gear
That lay therein, much stuff aside did throw
Ere from the lowest depths his hand did bear
A silken cloth of red, embroidered fair,
Wrapped about something; this upon the board
He laid, and 'gan unfold the precious hoard.

With languid eyes that hoped for little joy
Rhodope, as she turned, gazed down thereon,
Waiting the showing forth of that fair toy,
In days long past from fear and battle won;
But yet a strange light in her bright eyes shone
When now the goodman did the cloth unfold,
And showed the gleam of precious gems and gold.

And there upon the silken cloth now lay
Twin shoes first made for some fair woman's feet,
Wrought like the meadows of an April day,
With gems amidst the sun of gold; most meet
To show in kings' halls, when the music sweet
Is at its softest, and the dance grown slow,
Midst of white folds the feet of maids may show.

Now by these fair things did Rhodope stand,
And, blushing faintly, 'gan the latchets touch,
And daintily across them drew her hand,
Then let it fall, smiling, that overmuch
She thought of them; then turned away to such
Rude work as then the season asked of her,
With face firm set that weary life to bear.

Then said the goodman, with a rueful smile
Turned on her, "Chick or child I had not then,
But riches, wherewith fortune did beguile
My heart to ask for more; and now again
That thou grow'st fairer than the seed of men,
All goes from me—and let these go withal,
Since I am thrust so rudely to the wall!

"Long have I kept them; first, for this indeed,
That few men of our land have will therefor
To pay me duly; and the coming need
Still did I fear would make the past less sore;
And then withal a man well skilled in lore
Grew dreamy o'er them once, and said that they
Bore with them promise of a changing day.

"Yet bread is life, and while we live we yet
May turn a corner of this barren lane,
And Jove's high-priest hath ever prayed to get
These fair things, and prayed hitherto in vain:
Belike a yoke of oxen might I gain
To turn the home-field deeper, when the corn,
Such as it is, to barn and stack is borne.

"The meal-ark groweth empty too, and thou,
O fairest daughter, worthy to be clad
In weed like this, shalt feel November blow
No blessing to thee; cask-staves must be had
Against the vintage, seeing that men wax glad
Already o er the bunches, and the year
Folk deem great wealth to all men's sons will bear.

"So, daughter, unto thee this charge I give
To take these things to-morrow morn with thee
Unto Jove's priest, and say, we needs must live;
Therefore these fair shoes do I let him see,
That he may say what he will give to me,
That they may shine upon his daughter's feet,
When she goes forth the sacrifice to meet."

Now as he spake again a light flush came
Into her cheek, and died away again;
Then cried the goodwife: "Ah, thou bearest shame,
That we are fallen 'neath the feet of men,
That thou goest like a slave! what didst thou then

So coldly e'en on this man's son to look,
That he thy scornful eyes no more might brook?"

Still sat Rhodope, e'en as though of stone
Her face was, and the goodman spake and said:
"Nay, mother, nay, she is not such an one
As lightly to our highest to be wed
Before the crown of love has touched her head:
Be patient; hast thou ne'er heard stories tell
What things to such as her of old befell?"

Kindly he smiled at her, as half he meant
The words he said; but now her changeless eye
Cast on him one hard glance, and then she bent
Over her work, and with a half-choked sigh
The goodman rose, and from a corner nigh
Took up some willow-withes, and so began
To shape the handle of a winnowing fan.

BUT with the new day's sun might you behold
The maiden's feet firm planted on the way
Which led unto the vale, where field and fold
About the temple of the Thunderer lay,
And the priest wrought, a sturdy carle to-day
Within the hay-field or behind the plough,
To-morrow dealing with high things enow.

First betwixt sunny meads the highway ran
With homesteads set therein, and vineyards green,
Now merry with the voice of maid and man,
Who shouted greetings the tall rows between,
Whereto she answered softly, as a queen
Who feels herself of other make to be
Than those who worship her divinity.

The dark-eyed shepherd slowly by her passed,
And from his face faded the merry smile,
And down upon the road his eyes he cast,
And strove with other names his heart to wile
From thought of her; so coarse he seemed and vile
Before her smileless face, o'er which there shone
Some glory, as of a bright secret sun,

That was for her alone. The mother stood
Within her door, and as the gown of grey
Fluttered about her, and the coarse white hood
Flashed from the oak-shade o'er the sunlit way,
She muttered after her: "Ah, have thy day!
If thou wert set high up as thou art low,
On many a neck those feet of thine should go!"

But heeding little of the hearts of these
She went upon her way, and walking fast
Soon left the tilled fields and the cottages,
For toward the mountain-slopes the highway passed,
And turned unto the south, and 'gan at last
To mount aloft 'twixt heathery slopes set o'er
With red-trunked pines, and mossy rocks and hoar.

Still fast she went, though high the sun was grown,
For on strange thoughts and wild her heart was set;
Those things held in the bosom of her gown
Seemed teaching hopes she might not soon forget;
She clenched her hands harder and harder yet,
And cried aloud: "So small, so quickly done,
O idle, timorous life beneath the sun!

"And here amid these fields and mountains grey,
Drop after drop slowly it ebbs from me,
And leaves no new thing gained; day like to day,
Face like to face, as waves in some calm sea!
With memory of our sad mortality
Pipes the dull tune of earth; nought comes anigh
To give us some bright dream before we die.

"What say'st thou—'Beautiful thou art and livest,
And men there are, strong, young and fair enow,
To take with thankful heart e'en what thou givest;
Love and be loved then!'—Nay, heart, dost thou know
How through thin flame of love thou still wilt show
The long years set with mocking images,
Ready to trap me if I think of these?

"Ah, love they say, and love! Shall not love fade
And turn a prison, barred with vain regret
And vain remorse that we so lightly weighed
The woes wherein our stumbling feet were set,
Stifling with thoughts we never may forget;
Because life waneth, while we strive to turn
And seek another thing for which to yearn?

"So deem I of the life that holds me here,
As though I were the shade of one long dead,
Come back a while from Pluto's region drear
To mine own land where unremembered
My fathers are—Lo, now, these words just said,
This heathery slope my feet are passing o'er,
Yon grey-winged dove—has it not been before?

"Would then that I were gone, and lived again
Another life;—if it must still be so,
That life on life passes, forgotten, vain
To still our longings, that no soul can know
By what has been how this and this shall go—
Because methinks I yet have heard men tell
How lives there were wherein great things befell.

"How mid such life had I forgot the past,
Nor thought about the future! but been glad
While round my head a dreamy veil I cast,

And seemed to strive with seeming good or bad;
Till at the last some dream I might have had
That nigh a god I was become to be,
And, dying, yet should keep all memory;

"Know what I was, nor change my hope and fear
All utterly, but learn why I was born,
Nor come to loathe what once to me was dear,
Nor dwell amidst a world of ghosts forlorn,
Nor see kind eyes, and hear kind words, with scorn.
—But ye, O fields, and hills, and steads of men,
Why are ye fair to mock my longings then?"

And therewithal panting she turned, and stood
High up the hillside; a light fitful wind
Sung mournful ditties through the pine-tree wood
That edged the borders of the pass behind,
And made most fitting music to her mind,
But clear and hot the day of June did grow,
And a fair picture spread out down below.

The green hill-slopes, besprinkled o'er with kine,
And a grey neat-herd wandering here and there,
And then the greener squares of well-propped vine,
The changing cornfields, and the homesteads fair,
The white road winding on, that yet did bear
Specks as of men and horses; the grey sea
Meeting the dim horizon dreamily.

A little while she gazed, then, with a sigh,
She turned again, and went on toward the pass,
But slowly now, and somewhat wearily,
And murmuring as she met the coarser grass
Within the shade: "What, something moved I was,
By hope, and pity of myself! Well then
I shall not have that joy so oft again.

Then with bent head, 'twixt rocky wall and wall,
Slowly she went, and scarce knew what she thought,
So many a picture on her heart did fall,
Nor would she let one wish to her be brought
Of good or better. Going so, distraught,
The long rough road was nothing to her feet,
Nor took she heed of what her eyes might meet.

But so far through the pass at last she came,
That the road fell unto the temple-vale,
And there she stopped and started, for her name
She heard called out. She thought of many a tale
Of gods who brought to mortals joy or bale,
For so, despite herself, her thoughts would run,
That all the joy of life was not yet done.

But from the hillside came a dappled hound
That fawned upon her e'en as one who knew;
And when she raised her eyes, and looked around,
She saw the man indeed he 'longed unto,
A huntsman armed, and clad in gown of blue,
Come clattering down the stones of the pass-side;
So, standing still, his coming did she bide.

She smiled a smile that was not all of bliss,
For this was he of whom her mother spake,
The high-priest's son, who fain had made her his;
And at the sight of him her heart did ache
With hapless thoughts, and scorn and shame 'gan wake
Within her mind, that still she strove to lull,
Calling herself both cursed and beautiful.

So, while she gathered heart of grace to meet
The few words they might speak together there,
He was beside her; slim he was and fleet,
Well knit, with dark-brown eyes and crisp black hair,
Eager of aspect, round-chinned, fresh, and fair,
And well attired as for that simple folk
Who in those days might bear no great man's yoke.

Now his lip trembled, and he blushed blood-red,
Then paled again. "Rhodope! fair to see,
Thou go'st afoot this merry morn," he said;
"Hast thou some errand with my sire or me?"
And therewithal, as if unwittingly,
Unto her hand did he stretch out his hand;
But moveless as an image did she stand,

But that her gown was fluttering in the wind
That came up from the pass. She spake as one
That hath no care at heart: "I thought to find
Thy father, and to give to him alone
A message from my father. Is he gone?"
He seemed to swallow something in his throat:
"These two nights, maiden, hath he been afloat,

"Watching the tunnies; if thou turn'st again
Thou well mayst meet him coming from the sea."
"Nay," said she, "neither wholly shall be vain
My coming so far, since I have with me
Poor offerings meet for the divinity
From poor folk, which my mother bade me bear
To bless this midmost month of the glad year."

"In a good hour," he said, "for I have done
Little against the roes whereof to tell,
So I will fare with thee; and till the sun
Is getting low, in our house shalt thou dwell,
And in the evening, if it like thee well,
With helmet on the head, and well-strung bow,
Beside thee to thine own home will I go."

Nought spake she for a while, and his heart beat
Quicker with hope of some small happiness;
But at the last her eyes his eyes did meet.
She spake: "Few hearts this heart of mine will bless,
And yet for thee will I do nothing less
Than save thee from the anguish of the strife,
Wherewith thou fain wouldst make my life thy life.

"Thou art unhappy now, but we may part,
And to us both is left long lapse of time
To gain new bliss. What wouldst thou? To my heart
Cold now and alien are this folk and clime,
And while I dwell with them no woe or crime,
If so I may, shall stain my garments' hem;
Thou art an image like the rest of them:

"Yea, but an image unto me alone,
For unto thee this world is wide enow,
Full of warm hearts enow—so get thee gone
Upon thy way. I am not fallen so low
As unto thee dreams of false love to show,
Or for my very heart's own weariness
To give thee clinging life-long sharp distress.

"Now fain I would unto the temple-stead;
And, if thou mayst, do thou go otherwhere,
For good it were that all thy hopes were dead,
Since nought but bitter fruit they now can bear."
He gazed at her as one who doth not hear,
Or hears an outland tongue ill understood;
While love and hate made wild-fire of his blood.

Yea, she belike was nigher unto death
Than she might know; yet did he turn at last
And, clutching tight his short-sword's gold-wrought sheath,
Slowly along the seaward way he passed,
Nor backward at her any look he cast,
For fate would not that his blind eyes should see
How on the way her tears fell plenteously.

Yet not long there she stayed, but set her face
Unto the downward road, but had not fared
A many yards from that their meeting-place,
Before upon the wind a sound she heard,
As though some poor wretch a great sorrow bared
Unto the eyes of heaven, and then her feet
With quicker steps the stony way did meet.

And soon she said: "O fate, all left behind,
I follow thee adown the bitter road
With weary feet, and heavy eyes and blind,
That leadeth to thy far unknown abode;
No need, then, with thy stings my flesh to goad,
Keep them for those that strive with thee in vain,
And leave me to my constant weary pain."

Now the pass, widening, to her eyes did show
The little vale hemmed in by hills around,
Wherein was Jove's house fair and great enow,
Some three miles thence, but on a rising ground,
And with fair fields as a green girdle bound,
And guarded well by long low houses white,
Orchards for fruit, and gardens for delight.

Far off, like little spots of white, she saw
The long-winged circling pigeons glittering
Above the roofs, the noise of rook and daw
Came sweet upon the wind from the dark ring
Of elms that edged the cornfields; with wide wing
The fork-tailed restless kite sailed over her,
Hushing the twitter of the linnets near.

She stayed now, gazing downward; at her feet
A dark wood clad the hollow of the hill,
And its black shade a little lake did meet,
Whose waters smooth a babbling stream did still,
Then toward the temple-stead stretched on, until
Green meads with oaks beset 'gan hem it in,
And from its nether end the stream did win.

She gazed and saw not, heard and did not hear,
But said: "Once more have I been vehement,
Have spoken out, as if I knew from where
Come good and ill, and whither they are sent,
As though I knew whereon I was intent;
So, knowing that I know not, e'en as these
Who think themselves as gods and goddesses

"To know both good and evil must I do.
Now ne'er again in this wise shall it be
While here I dwell, nor shall false hope shine through
My prison bars, false passion jeer at me
With what might hap if I were changed and free;
The end shall come at last, and find me here,
Desiring nought, and free from hope or fear."

So saying, but with face cleared not at all,
Rather with trembling lips, upon her way
Once more she went; short now did shadows fall,
It grew unto the hottest of the day,
And round the mountain-tops the sky waxed grey
For very heat; June's sceptre o'er the earth,
If rest it gave, kept back some little mirth.

At last upon the bridge the stream that crossed
Just ere it met the lake she set her feet,
And walked on swiftly, e'en as one clean lost
In thought, till at its end her skirt did meet
A bough of briar-rose, whose blossoms sweet
Were draggled in the dust; she stooped thereto
And from her hem its hooked green thorns she drew.

Then heaving a deep breath, she cast aside
The broken bough; and from the dusty road
She turned, and o'er the parapet she eyed
The broad blue lake, the basking pike's abode,
And the dark oakwood where the pigeons cooed;
And as she gazed, some little touch of bliss
Came over her amidst her loneliness.

Drowsy she felt, and weary with the way,
And mid such listlessness that brought no pain,
She drew her arms from off the coping grey,
And o'er the bridge went slowly back again,
As though no whit of purpose did remain
Within her mind; but when the other end
She passed, along the stream she 'gan to wend.

She watched its eddies till it widened out
Into the breezy lake, and even there
Began the wood; so then she turned about,
And shading her grave eyes with fingers fair,
Beneath the sun beheld the temple glare
O'er the far tree-tops; then she cast her down
Within the shade on last year's oak-leaves brown.

There as she lay, at last her fingers stole
Unto the things that on her bosom lay,
She drew them forth and slowly 'gan unroll
The silken cloth, until a wandering ray
Upon the shoes' bright 'broideries 'gan to play
Through the thick leaves; and with a flickering smile
She 'gan her mind with stories to beguile.

Pondering for whom those dainty things were wrought,
And in what land; and in what wondrous wise
She missed the gift of them; and what things brought
The sea-thieves to her land—until her eyes
Fell on her own gear wrought in homely guise,
And with a half smile she let fall the gold
And glistening gems her listless hand did hold.

Then long she lay there, gazing at the sky
Between the thick leaves, growing drowsier,
While slowly the grey rabbit hobbled by,
And the slim squirrel twisted over her
As one to heed not; as if none were near
The woodpecker slipped up the smooth-barked tree,
The water-hen clucked nigh her fearlessly,

But in a little while she woke, and still
Felt as if dreaming; all seemed far away
Save present rest, both hope and fear and ill;
The sun was past the middle of the day,
But bathed in flood of light the world still lay,
And all was quiet, but for faint sounds made
By the wood-creatures wild and unafraid.

From out her wallet now coarse food she drew,
And ate with dainty mouth, then o'er the strip
Of dazzling sunlight where the daisies grew
Unto the babbling streamlet's rushy lip
She went, and kneeling down thereby did dip
Her hollow hand into the water grey
And drank, then back again she went her way.

There 'neath the tree-bole lay the glittering shoes,
And over them she stood awhile and gazed,
Then stooped adown as though one might not choose;
And from the grass one by the latchet raised,
And with the eyes of one by slumber dazed
Did off her own foot-gear, and one by one
Set the bright things her shapely feet upon.

Then to the thick wood slowly did she turn,
And through its cool shade wandered till once more
Thinner it grew, and spots of light did burn
Upon her jewelled feet, till lay before
Her upraised eyes a bay with sandy shore;
And 'twixt the waves and birds' abiding-place
Was stretched a treeless, sunlit, grassy space.

Friendly the sun, the bright flowers, and the grass
Seemed after the dark wood; with upraised gown
Slowly unto the water did she pass,
And on the grassy edge she sat her down;
And since right swift these latter hours had flown
Less did the sun burn; there awhile she lay
Watching a little breeze sweep up the bay.

Shallow it was, a shore of hard white sand
Met the green herbage, and as clear as glass
The water ran in ripples o'er that strand,
Until it well-nigh touched the flowery grass;
A dainty bath for weary limbs it was,
And so the maiden thought belike, for she
'Gan put her raiment from her languidly.

Until at last from out her poor array,
Pure did she rise e'en as that other One
Rose up from out the ragged billows grey,
For earth's dull days and heavy to atone;
How like another sun her gold hair shone;
In the green place, as down she knelt, and raised
The glittering shoes, and long time on them gazed,

As on strange guides that thus had brought her there,
Then cast them by, so that apart they fell,
And in the sunlight glittering lay and fair,
Like the elves' blossoms, hard and lacking smell;
Then to the sward she stooped, and bud and bell
Of the June's children gat into her hand,
And left the grass for the scarce-covered sand.

She stood to watch the thin waves mount her feet
Before she tried the deep, then toward the wide,
Sun-litten space she turned, and 'gan to meet
The freshness of the water cool, and sighed
For pleasure as the little rippling tide
Lapped her about, and slow she wandered on
Till many a foot from shore she now had won.

There, as she played, she heard a bird's harsh cry,
And looking to the steep hill-side could see
A broad-winged eagle hovering anigh,
And stood to watch his sweeping flight and free
Dark 'gainst the sky, then turned round leisurely
Unto the bank, and saw a bright red ray
Shoot from a great gem on the sea-thieves' prey.

Then slowly through the water did she move,
Down on the changing ripple gazing still,
As loth to leave it, and once more above
Her golden head rang out the erne's note shrill,
Grown nigher now; she turned unto the hill,
And saw him not, and once again her eyes
Fell on the strange shoes' jewelled 'broideries.

And even therewithal a noise of wings
Flapping, and close at hand—again the cry,
And then the glitter of those dainty things
Was gone, as a great mass fell suddenly,
And rose again, ere Rhodope could try
To raise her voice, for now might she behold
Within his claws the gleam of gems and gold.

Awhile she gazed at him as, circling wide,
He soared aloft, and for a space could see
The gold shoe glitter, till the rock-crowned side
Of the great mountain hid him presently,
And she 'gan laugh that such a thing should be
So wrought of fate, for little did she fear
The lack of their poor wealth, or pinching cheer.

But when she was aland again and clad,
And turned back through the wood, a sudden thought
Shot through her heart, and made her somewhat glad;
"Small things," she said, "my feet have thither brought:
Perchance this strange hap shall not be for nought."
And therewithal stories she 'gan to tell
Unto her heart how such things once befell:

How as it had been it might be again.
Then from her fragrant breast she took the shoe
Yet left, and turned it o'er and o'er in vain,
If yet she might therein find aught of new
To tell her what all meant; and thus she drew
Unto the wood's edge, and once more sat down
Upon the fresh grass and the oak-leaves brown.

And there beneath the quickly sinking sun
She took again her foot-gear cast aside,
And, now scarce seeing them, she did them on;
And while the pie from out the oak-boughs cried
Over her head, arose and slowly hied
Unto the road again, and backward turned
Up through the pass. Blood-red behind her burned

The sunless sky, and scarce awake she seemed,
As 'gainst the hill she toiled, and when at last
Beneath the moon far off the grey sea gleamed,
And all the rugged mountain road was passed,
Back from her eyes the wandering locks she cast,
And o'er her cheeks warm ran the tears, as she
Told herself tales of what she yet might be.

But cold awakening had she when she came
Unto the half-deserted homestead gate,
And she must think how she would take the blame
That from her mother did her deed await,
Without a slave-like frightened frown at fate;
Must harden yet her heart once more to face
Her father's wondering sigh at his hard case.

So when within the dimly-lighted hall
Her mother's wrath brake out, as she did hear
Her cold words, and her father's knife did fall
Clattering adown; then seemed all life so drear,
Hapless and loveless, and so hard to bear,
So little worth the bearing, that a pang
Of very hate from out her heart up-sprang.

With cold eyes, but a smile on her red lips,
She watched them; how her father stooped again
And took his knife, and how once more the chips
Flew from the bowl half finished, but in vain,
Because he saw it not; she watched the rain
Of tears wherewith her mother did bewail
That all her joy in her one child should fail.

But when her mother's tears to sobs were turned
The goodman rose and took her hand in his,
And then, with sunken eyes for love that yearned,
Gazed hard at her, and said, "Nay, child, some bliss
Awaits thee surely yet; enough it is;
Trouble and hunger shall not chase me long,
The walls of one abiding-place are strong;

"And thither now I go apace, my child."
Askance she looked at him with steady eyes,
But when she saw that midst his words he smiled
With trembling lips, then in her heart 'gan rise

Strange thoughts that troubled her like memories
And changed her face; she drew her hands from
him,
And yet before her eyes his face waxed dim.

Then down the old man sat, and now began
To talk of how their life went, and their needs,
In cheerful strain; and, even as a man,
Unbeaten yet by fortune's spiteful deeds,
Spoke of the troublous twisted way that leads
To peace and happiness, till to a smile
The goodwife's tearful face he did beguile.

So slipped the night away, and the June sun
Rose the next morn as though no woe there were
Upon the earth, and never any one
Was blind with love or bent by hopeless care;
But small content was in the homestead there,
Despite the bright-eyed June, for unto two
That dwelt there, life still held too much to do.

While to the third, empty of deeds it seemed,
A dragging dulness changed by here a pain,
And there a hope, waking or sleeping, dreamed;
But, waking still or sleeping, dreamed in vain;
For how could anything be loss or gain
When still the order of the world went round,
And still the wall of death all hopes did bound?

So said she oft, and fell to hating men;
Nevertheless with hope still beat her heart,
And changing thoughts that rose and fell again
Would stir within her as she sat apart,
And to her brow the unbidden blood would start,
And she would rise, nor know whereon she trod,
And forth she walked as one who walks with God.

Oftener indeed that dull and heavy mood
Oppressed her, and when any were anigh,
Little she spake, either of bad or good,
Nor would she heed the folk that were thereby
So much as thereon to look scornfully;
Unless perchance her father stood anear,
And then her set hard face she strove to clear.

And if he, fearful, answered with no smile
Unto the softening eyes, yet when he went
About his labour, would he so beguile
His heart with thought of her, that right content
He 'gan to feel with what the gods had sent;
The little flame of love that in him burned,
Hard things and ill to part of pleasure turned.

Withal his worldly things went not so ill
As for a luckless man; the bounteous year
More than before his barn and vats did fill
With the earth's fruit, and bettered was his cheer;
So that he watched the winter draw anear
Calmly this tide, and deemed he yet might live,
Some joy unto his daughter's heart to give.

But for the one shoe that the erne had left,
The goodwife's word was, "Take the cursed thing,
And when the gems from out of it are reft,
Into the fire the weaver's rag go fling;
Would in like wise the fond desires, that cling
Unto Rhodope's pride, we thus might burn,
That she to some good life at last might turn!

"I think some poison with a double curse
Hath smitten her, and double wilfulness;
For surely now she groweth worse and worse,
Since the bright rag her wayworn foot did press—
Well then—and surely thou wilt do no less
Than as I bid—a many things we need,
More than this waif of cast-off royal weed."

With querulous voice she spake, because she saw
Her husband eye Rhodope's face, as she
Still through her fingers did the grey thread draw
From out the rock, and sitting quietly
Seemed not to heed what all the talk might be;
But for the goodman's self he answered not,
Until at last the goodwife waxed o'er hot,

And laid hard word on word, till she began
To say, "Alas, and wherefore was I wed
To such an one as is a foredoomed man?
Lo, all this grief hast thou brought on my head,
So wander forth, and dream as do the dead
When to the shadowy land they first are brought!
Surely thou knowest that we lack for nought!"

Then blind with rage from out the place she
went,
But still the goodman stood awhile, and gazed
Upon Rhodope, sitting as intent
Upon her work, nor aught her fair head raised.
At last he spake: "Well, never was I praised
For wisdom overmuch before this day,
And can I now be certain of the way?

"True is it that our needs are much and sore,
And that those gems would help us plenteously,
Yet do I grudge now more than heretofore
The very last of that strange gift to see.
What sayest thou, how dost thou counsel me,
O daughter? didst thou ever hear folk tell
Of the strange dream that at thy birth befell?"

Blood-red her face grew as she looked on him,
And with her foot the twirling spindle stayed.
"Yea," said she, "something have I heard, but
dim

My memory is, and little have I weighed
The worth thereof." The goodman smiled and said,
"Nay, child, as little wise as I may be,
Yet know I that thou liest certainly.

"And so no need there is to tell the tale,
Or ask thee more what thou wouldst have me do;
Have thou thy will, for fate shall yet prevail,
Though oft we deem we lead her thereunto
Where lies our good—Daughter, keep thou the shoe,
And let the wise men with their wisdom play,
While we go dream about a happier day."

While he was speaking had she laid adown
The rock, and risen unto her feet, and now
Upon her bosom lay his visage brown,
As round him both her fair arms did she throw;
Softly she said, "Somewhat thy need I know,
Remember this whatever happeneth,
Let it make sweet the space 'twixt this and death!

"Hard is the world; I, loved ere I was born,
This once alone perchance thy heart shall feel,
And thou shalt go about, of love forlorn,
And little move my heart of stone and steel:
Ah, if another life our life might heal,
And love become no more the sport of time,
Chained upon either hand to pain and crime!"

A little time she hung about him thus,
And then her arms from round his neck unwound,
And went her ways; his mouth grew piteous
When he had lost her fluttering gown's light sound,
And fast his tears 'gan fall upon the ground.
At last he turned: "So is it now," he said,
"With me as with a man soon to be dead.

"Wise is he all at once, and knows not why,
And brave who erst was timorous; fair of speech,
Whose tongue once stammered with uncertainty,
Because his soul to the dark land doth reach.
And is it so that love to me doth teach
New things, because he needs must get him gone,
And leave me with his memories all alone?"

So the year passed, as has been writ afore,
With better hopes; the pinching winter-tide
Went by, and spring his tender longings bore
Into all hearts, and scattered troubles wide,
Nor yet to see the fruit of them would bide,
But left the burning summer next to deal
With hearts of men, and hope from them to steal.

Now came the time round even to the day
Whereon Rhodope made her journey vain
Unto the valley where the temple lay,
And now, too, when the morn was on the wane,
Before the homestead door she stood again,
For to the town she needs must go, to bring,
For their poor household work, some needful thing.

So with slow feet she crossed the threshold o'er
With brow a little knitted, as if she
Dealt with some troublous thought, that oft before
Had mazed her mind: then no less, steadily
Through the fair day she went on toward the sea,
For by the port, and lying low adown,
Stretched out their unwalled simple market-town.

Some mile of highway had she got to pace,
Ere she might reach the first house of the street
That led unto the lowly market-place;
So on she went, and still her eyes did meet
The elm-tree shade that flickered o'er her feet.
Though thronged beyond its wont the white way was,
With folk well clad, who toward the town did pass,

Swiftly she went, till come half-way belike,
Then stayed her feet and looked up suddenly;
There by the way-side the hot sun did strike
Upon a patch of grass, whereon did lie
A grey old hound, and 'gainst an elm thereby
His master leaned, a shepherd older yet,
Whose deep-sunk eyes her eyes unwitting met.

Therewith a knot of folk she had just passed
Passed her in turn, maidens and youths they were,
Blithe with their life and youth; on her they cast
Such looks as if they had a mind to jeer,
Yet held back, some by wonder, some by fear,
Went on a space until they deemed them free,
Then through the summer day outburst their glee.

Her deep eyes followed them, and yet, indeed,
As images she saw them; there a space
Musing she stood, then turned, and at slow speed
Went back again to her abiding-place,
Just as the old man moved his puckered face
To speak some word to her; and so at last,
O'er her own threshold inward her feet passed.

Then to her sleeping-room she went, and knelt
Beside a chest, and raised the lid, and drew
From out the dark where year-long it had dwelt,
Remembered yet the while, the precious shoe,
And dreamy over it awhile she grew,
Then set it in her bosom, and went forth,
Pondering o'er what her fond desires were worth.

Still folk thronged on the highway; as she went
Some fragment of their talk would reach her ear
Howso upon her dreams she was intent;
Of new-come men they spake, their ways and gear,
How glorious of array, how great they were,
How huge and fair their galley, that last eve
The little black-quayed haven did receive.

That talk of strange and great things raised at last
New and wild hopes in her, but none the less
Straightway unto her journey's end she passed,
And did what she must do, nor cared to guess
Why in the market-place all folk did press
Around a glitter as of steel and gold
That in the midst thereof she did behold.

Yet, her work done, she gat her back again
Unto the market-place, and curiously
'Gan eye the concourse, yea, at last, was fain
Unto the core thereof to draw anigh;
Her heart beat; strange she felt and knew not why,
As on she went, and still the wondering folk
To right and left before her beauty broke.

A temple midmost of the market-place,
Raised to the Mother of the Gods here stood,
An ancient house in guise of other days,
And e'en amid that simple folk deemed rude;
Such as it was the country-folk thought good
To meet and talk there, o'er such things as they
Found hard to deal with as day passed by day.

So when she drew anigh its steps, thereon
She saw indeed a goodly company,
For there sat strange men, young and old, who shone
In such attire as scarce she thought could be
And by these glittering folk from over sea
Were the land's fathers, and the chief-priest dight
To do a solemn sacrifice aright.

E'en as she came into the foremost rank,
Bright gleamed the slayer's falchion in the sun,
And silently the rose-crowned heifer sank
Upon the time-worn pavement; yet not one
Of all the sea-farers might gaze upon
Victim or priest, for forth stood Rhodope
Lone on the steps, a glorious thing to see.

For on a tripod by the altar's side,
Gleaming, as that day year agone it gleamed,
The shoe her foot had pressed she now espied,
And o'er her soul a sudden light there streamed,
While from her eager eyes such glory beamed,
That all folk stared astonished, all must wait
For her first word as for the stroke of fate.

Yea, there she stood, that all fair things did lack,
Clad in a gown of dark grey woollen stuff,
The wares she had just dealt for at her back,
And all about her homely, coarse, and rough,
Yet, since her beauty blessed them, good enough:
For, as a goddess wandering on the earth,
How might she deem earth's richest gauds of worth?

Gently, yet with no flush on her smooth cheek,
She mounted up the steps, and spake out clear:
"Perchance a match for yon fair thing ye seek
Ye seem to prize so much; it lieth here,
And both of them on this day was-a-year
Were on my feet. My father will be glad
Because great joy in them the old man had."

Then went a great shout up into the sky,
And in despite herself the blood would rise
Unto her cheek and brow, as quietly
From her white fragrant bosom, a world's prize,
She drew the mass of blazing 'broideries,
And laid it by its fellow, and her hand
Trembled, as there sun-litten she did stand.

Then cried a grey-beard, clad in gems and gold:
"Praise to the Gods who do all things aright,
And thus have given my weak eyes to behold
Now, at the end of life, so fair a sight;
Have given withal unto the worth and might
Of the great king so fair a mate as thee—
How good, how good it is thine eyes to see!"

She was pale now, though ne'er a word she spake,
And held her head, as though a crown it wore,
And 'gan 'neath gold and golden hair to ache
With new-born longings, fears unknown before;
And calmly her deep eyes the men passed o'er
Who sat there marvelling; till the old man said:
"Wonder not overmuch, O glorious maid,

"At all these things! The Gods who wrought thee thus,
And kept thee here apart from ill men's eyes
To show thee forth so much more marvellous,
Have led our hearts unto thee in this wise;
For the great king did solemn sacrifice
Unto the Gods well-nigh a year agone,
And in the bright sun bright the altar shone.

"But e'en as to its highest shot the flame,
And to the awful Gods our hearts did turn,
A cry from out the far blue sky there came,
And a bright thing 'twixt flame and sun did burn,
And some there were who said they could discern
An eagle, like a faint speck, far above
The altar, whereon lay this gift of love.

"How this may be I know not, but the king
Trembled, and toward the altar stretched his hand,
And drew to him the strange-sent, fair-wrought thing,
And, thereon staring, a long while did stand,
And left the place, not giving such command
As he was wont, and still from that day forth
Took little heed of things once held of worth.

"Silent and pale, and strange-eyed still he grew,
And yet said nought hereon for many days,
Until at last he bade us take this shoe
And diligently search in every place
That we might come to, till we saw the face
Of her whose foot had touched it. 'Certainly,
Whereso she is, she hath been wrought for me.

"'Whereso she is, and by what name men name
Her loveliness and love unknown: lo now,
Young am I, and have heretofore had shame
To bend to love, e'en as my folk bend low
Before my throne, but now my pride doth grow
As a quenched candle in a golden house,
And through the dark I wander timorous.'

"We marvelled at his word, but deemed some God
Possessed his heart; but thenceforth constantly
Have we gone over the wide world, and trod
Rough ways enow, been tossed o'er many a sea,
And dealt with many a lie, until to thee
The Gods have brought us, O thou wondrous one!
That we might see thee ere our days are done."

"Ah me!" she said, "what thing do ye demand?
Is it a little thing that I should go,
Leaving my people and my father's land,
To wed some proud great man I do not know?
I look for no glad life; yea, it is so
That if a grain of love were left in me
In vain your keel had cleft our girdling sea.

"No need to speak; I know what ye would say—
—That where I go, still I and love shall rule,
That where I go I bear about the day
Made golden by my beauty—base and dull,
Mid hollow shows to strive with knave and fool,
With death, and nothing done, to end it all!
—Yet fear ye not! for surely I shall fall

"Where the Gods cast me, nor turn round about
To gaze on bygone time—so it shall be
E'en as ye will." They stared at her, in doubt
If her sweet lips had spoken; yea, and she
Flushed 'neath their eyes fixed on her wonderingly,
Wondering herself at the new fear, new scorn
That with beginning of new days was born.

But they, abased before the rough-clad maid,
Now led her to an empty ivory chair,
And each man knee unto the pavement laid,
And, unashamed, did reverence to her there;
And ever did she seem to grow more fair
Before their eyes, till fear arose in them
As they bent down to her rude garment's hem.

And then the rites unto the Gods went on,
While she sat musing on the wondrous tale;
And when all these at last were duly done,
They prayed her give command when they should sail;
She raised her face, grown quiet now and pale,
And said in a low voice: "To-day were best,
For here at least may I have nought of rest.

"The old is gone, the new is not yet come,
Familiar things with strange eyes I behold,
And nowhere now I seem to have a home.
But when I go from homespun unto gold,
My father and mother, poor folk bent and old,
Beaten by fortune, needs must go with me,
And share my proud new life beyond the sea.

"And since the old man loveth me too well,
And hitherto small joy from me hath gained,
Meet is it that my lips alone should tell
How all is changed, and weal that long hath waned
Is waxen now, and the cold rain that rained
Upon his life's grey day hath met the sun,
And blossoms spring from the dull earth and dun.

"And, O ye folk, midst whom my feet have dwelt,
And whom I leave now, if so be, that I
Hard anger in my heart at whiles have felt
'Gainst things that pressed upon me wearily,
Yet now the kindness of time past draws nigh,
And ye will be my folk still, when I go
Unto a land where e'en your name none know."

Then, midst their marvelling silence, she arose,
And took her cast-down fardel up again,
And went her ways; and they, by whom all close
Her body passed, must tremble, and be fain
To think of common things to dull the pain
Of longing, as her lovely majesty,
Too sweet and strange for earth, brushed swiftly by.

And yet of earth she was, and as she went
Through the shrunk shadow to her old abode,
Fresh hope a new joy through her body sent,
The clear cold vision of her soul to cloud;
And less the striving world seemed like a load
To weary her, than a strange curious toy,
To solace life with foolish grief and joy.

Still grew that hope in her, and when she came
Unto the homestead, and her father met
Anigh the byre, then doubt, and fear, and shame,
Amid the joy of change did she forget,
As firm feet mid the loitering kine she set,
And cried aloud, "O father, turn and gaze
On Fortune's friend, the Queen of glorious days!"

He turned and stared upon her glittering eyes
And godlike mien, and 'gan to speak, but she
Cried out, "The very Gods may call us wise,
For great days have they given to thee and me,
Things stranger than these meadows shall we see,
And thou shalt wonder that thou e'er didst keep
These kine, as Phœbus erst Admetus' sheep!"

Then did she pour the whole tale out on him;
Eager at first, but faltered to behold
How he fell trembling in his every limb;
Through the new fever that her heart did fold,
Again shame thrust its steely point and cold:
"Alas," she thought, "when all the tale is done,
Why go we thus alone beneath the sun?"

He tried to speak, and the words came at last;
"If thou art glad, then surely I am glad—
—And yet, we thought our evil time had passed;
Surely the days grew not so wholly bad!
Ah me, a growing hope of late I had
Of quiet days and sweet—yet shame of me,
That I should dull the joy that gladdeth thee!

"Daughter, thy bidding I will surely do,
And go with thee; nathless bethink thee yet,
How yesterday shall seem full long ago,
When with to-morrow's dew the grass is wet.
Child, I will pray thee never to forget
This face of mine, this heart that loves thee well;
Let distance though, and time that sweet tale tell!"

She cried: "Ah, wilt thou have me lonelier
Than the Gods made me? As day passes day
The life of fear and hope that happened here,
Most oft no doubt shall seem full far away:
Yet be thou nigh, to be a scarce-felt stay
To my mazed steps, a green close fresh and sweet,
On life's hard way, to cool my weary feet.

"I will not take my bidding back; go thou,
And get thee ready swiftly to be gone.
The sails are flapping in the haven now,
And we depart before the day is done.
O be thou glad, thou shalt not be alone!
Canst thou not see e'en now how this my face
Is softened to thee by the happy days?"

He said no more, but eyed her lovingly,
Upon his worn old face a trembling smile;
Then turned him toward the house with one great sigh,
And she was left alone a little while,
Her restlessness with strange dreams to beguile,
And though bright things those dreams did nowise lack,
Yet oft oft-conquered cold fear would come back.

But midst her thoughts from out the house there came
Her father and her mother, and she gazed
Upon the twain with something more than shame,
As she beheld what timid eyes and mazed
The goodwife to her queenly beauty raised,
And how with patient mien her father went,
On all her motions lovingly intent.

Then to the market-place passed on the three,
And though her grey gown only covered her,
Her mother bore some shreds of bravery;
And clad her father was in scarlet gear,
Worn now and wretched, that he once did bear
When long ago at his rich board he sat,
And all that land's best cheer the glad guests gat.

And as they stood there now, the simple folk,
Grown used unto the wonder of the tale,
Warmed with new joy, and into shouts outbroke;
The goodwife flushed, but the old man turned pale,
And gazed round helpless, his limbs seemed to fail
As though age pressed him sore; Rhodope, she
Grew softer-eyed, and spake majestically;

"Fain am I, lords, that we depart straightway;
For if a dream this is, I long full sore
E'en in my dream to feel the wind-blown spray,
And hear the well-timed rolling of the oar,
And ere dark night behold the lessening shore
From your dreamed dromond's deck—so pass we on,
If e'en so far as this my dream hath won."

Then said they: "All is ready in due wise,
E'en as thou bad'st, the ship has been warped round
And rideth toward the sea, and sacrifice
Has there been done, and goodly gifts been found
For this land's folk: but wilt thou not be crowned
And clad in fair array of gold, that we
May show thy beauty meetly to the sea?"

"Nay," said she, "in this lowly guise of mine
Let the king first behold me standing there,
The Gods' gift, that his heart may more incline
Towards mine, if thus he note me strange and fair,
Grown up a queen, yet with no wondrous care
For what I should be. Make no more delay,
Low looks the sun upon the watery way."

So seaward now with these all people moved
Rejoicing, though belike they scarce knew why,
And now Rhodope felt herself beloved;
And as the south wind breathed deliciously
O'er flowers and sweet things, and the sun did die
Amid soft golden haze, her loveliness
She 'gan to feel, and all the world to bless.

In her slim hand her father's hand she took,
Her red lips trembled, and her eyes were wet
With tears that fell not; but the old man shook
As one who sees death; then a hand she set
Upon his shoulder, and said, "Long years yet,
With loving eyes these eyes shalt thou behold
Among the glimmer of fair things and gold."

But nought he answered, and they came full soon,
To where the gangway ran from out the ship
On to the black pier; white yet was the moon,
And the sun's rim nigh in the sea did dip,
And from the place where sky met ocean's lip,
Ran a great road of gold across the sea,
Where played the unquiet waves impatiently.

Now was her foot upon the gangway plank;
Now over the green depths and oars blood-red
Fluttered her gown, and from the low green bank
Above the sea a cry came, as her head
Gleamed golden in the way that westward led,
And on the deck her feet were, but no more
She looked back then unto the peopled shore.

But with one hand held back as if to take
Her father's hand, she went on toward the prow;
And there she stood, and watched the billows break,
Nor noted when men back the ropes did throw,
And scarce knew when the sea fell from the bow
And the ship moved; nor turned, till, cold and grey,
And darkling fast, the waste before her lay.

But at the last she turned on well-poised feet,
And gazed adown the twilight decks, and heard
The freshening wind about the cordage beat,
The master's and rough helmsman's answering word,
And all alone she felt now, and afeard,
In spite of all the folk who stood around,
Unto her lightest service straightly bound.

A terror seized her; down the deck she passed,
Her gown driven close against her, and her hair
Loosed by the driving wind; till at the mast
She stayed, and muttered: "Ah, he is not there.
And I, where am I? the dream seemed so fair
When it began; but now am I alone,
Waiting, I know not what, till life be done."

Trembling she drew her hand across her brow
As one who wakes; and then, grown calm once more,
She went with steady feet unto the prow,
And ran the line of reverent faces o'er
With anxious eyes, and stayed at last before
The ancient grey-haired man, the chief of these,
And spoke amid the washing of the seas:

"Where is my father? I am fain to speak
Of many things with him, we two alone;
For mid these winds and waves my heart grows weak
With memory of the days for ever gone."
The moon was bright, the swaying lanterns shone
On her pale face, and fluttering garment's hem—
—Each stared on each, and silence was on them.

And midst that silence a new lonely pain,
Like sundering death, smote on her, till he spoke:
"O queen, what sayest thou? the old man was fain,
He told us, still to dwell among his folk;
He said, thou knew'st he might not bear the yoke
Of strange eyes watching him—what say I more,
Surely thou know'st he never left the shore?

"I deemed him wise and true: but give command
If so thou willest; certes no great thing
It is, in two hours' space to make the land,
Though much the land-wind now is freshening."
One slender hand to the rough shroud did cling,
As her limbs failed; she raised the other one,
And moved her lips to bid the thing be done:

Yet no words came, she stood upright again,
And dropped her hand and said, "I strive with change,
I strive with death the Gods' toy, but in vain:
No otherwise than thus might all be strange."
Therewith she turned, her unseeing eyes did range
Wide o'er the tumbling waste of waters grey,
As swift the black ship went upon her way.

DARK night upon the cold still eve did fall
Amidst the tale, and now the fair guest-hall
Was lit with nought but firelight, as they sat,
Silent, soft-hearted, and compassionate
Midst their own flickering shadows; yet too old
They were, to talk about the story told;
Too old, and knew too well what each man thought,
And feared in any pleasure to be caught,
That hid a snare of sadness at its end.
So slowly did the tale's sweet sorrow blend

With their own quenched desires, and past regret,
And dear-loved follies they might scarce forget;
That in these latter days indeed, were grown
Nought but a tale, for others to bemoan,
Who had not learned with sorrow's self to deal;
Who had no need an hour of bliss to steal,
With trembling hands, from the dark treasury
Of time long unregarded, long gone by,
Where cobwebbed o'er amid the dust it lay.
But these stole not, nor strove; from day to day
Enough of pleasure to their lot did fall
To stay them, that on death they should not call
With change or rest to end the weary tide;
Though careless now, his coming did they bide.

SCARCE aught was left of autumn-tide to die
When next they met; the north-east wind rushed by
The house anigh the woods, wherein they were,
And in the oaks and hollies might they hear
Its roar grow greater with the dying morn:
A hard grey day it was, yet scarce forlorn,
Since scarcely aught of tender or of sweet
Was left the year, its ruggedness to meet.
Bare was the country-side of work and folk:
There from the hill-side stead straight out the smoke,
Over the climbing row of corn-ricks, sailed;
And few folk stirred; a blue-clad horseman hailed
A shepherd from the white way, little heard
'Twixt ridge and hollow by November seared;
The ferryman stared long adown the road
That led unto his tottering thatched abode,
Ere the dark speck into a goodwife turned;
The smouldering weed-heap by the garden burned;
Side-long the plough beside the field-gate lay,
With no one nigh to scare the birds away,
That twittered mid the scanty wisps of straw.
So round the fire the ancient folk did draw,
And, mid the day-dreams, that hung round about,
Rather beheld the wild-wood dim with doubt,
And twilight of the cloudy leafless tide,
Than the scant-peopled fallow country-side,
Whose fields the woods hemmed in: the world grew old
Unto their eyes, and lacked house, field, and fold.

Then spake a wanderer: "Long the tale I tell,
Though in few years the deeds thereof befell,
In a strange land and barren, far removed
From southlands and their bliss; yet folk beloved,
Yearning for love, striving 'gainst change and hate,
Strong, uncomplaining, yet compassionate,
Have dwelt therein—a strange and awful land
Where folk, as in the hollow of God's hand,
Beset with fearful things, yet fearing nought,
Have lived their lives and wondrous deeds have wrought—
Wild deeds, as other men. Yet these at least,
If death from but a rough and homely feast
Drew them away, lived not so full of care,
They and their sons, but that their lives did bear
The fruit of deeds recorded. Bear with me
If I shall seem to hold this history
Of a few freemen of the farthest north,
A handful, as a thing of too much worth;
Because this Iceland was my fathers' home,
Nay, somewhat of the selfsame stock they come
As these I tell of: know withal that we
Have ever deemed this tale as true to be,
As though those very Dwellers in Laxdale,
Risen from the dead had told us their own tale;
Who for the rest while yet they dwelt on earth
Wearied no God with prayers for more of mirth
Than dying men have; nor were ill-content
Because no God beside their sorrow went
Turning to flowery sward the rock-strewn way,
Weakness to strength, or darkness into day.
Therefore, no marvels hath my tale to tell,
But deals with such things as men know too well;
All that I have herein your hearts to move,
Is but the seed and fruit of bitter love."

THE LOVERS OF GUDRUN.

ARGUMENT.

This story shows how two friends loved a fair woman, and how he who loved her best had her to wife, though she loved him little or not at all; and how one of these two friends gave shame to and received death of the other, who in his turn came to his end by reason of that deed.

Of Herdholt and Bathstead.

HERDHOLT my tale names for the stead, where erst
Olaf the Peacock dwelt, nowise the worst
Among the great men of a noble day:
Upon a knoll amidst a vale it lay,
Nigh where Laxriver meets the western sea,
And in that day it nourished plenteously
Great wealth of sheep and cattle.
Ye shall know
That Olaf to a mighty house did go
To take to him a wife: Thorgerd he gat,
The daughter of the man, at Burg who sat,
After a great life, with eyes waxing dim,
Egil, the mighty son of Skallagrim.
Now of the sons the twain had, first we name
Kiartan alone, for eld's sake and for fame,
Then Steinthor, Haldor, Helgi, and Hauskuld,
All of good promise, strong and lithe and bold,
Yet little against Kiartan's glory weighed;
Besides these props the Peacock's house that stayed,
Two maidens, Thurid, Thorbiorg there were;
And furthermore a youth was fostered there,
Whom Thorleik, Olaf's brother, called his son:
Bodli his name was. Thus the tale is done
Of those who dwelt at Herdholt in those days.

Midst the grey slopes, Bathstead its roof did raise
Seven miles from Herdholt; Oswif, wise of men,
Who Thordis had to wife, abode there then
With his five sons, of whom let names go past
That are but names; but these were first and last,
Ospak and Thorolf: never, says my tale,
That Oswif's wisdom was of much avail
In making these, though they were stout enow;
But in his house a daughter did there grow
To perfect womanhood, Gudrun by name,
Whose birth the wondering world no more might blame
Than her's who erst called Tyndarus her sire,
What hearts soe'er, what roof-trees she might fire,
What hearts soe'er, what hearths she might leave cold,
Before the ending of the tale be told.
But where we take the story up, fifteen
The maiden's years were; Kiartan now had seen
His eighteenth spring, and younger by a year
Was Bodli, son of Thorleik.
Now most fair
Seemed Olaf's lot in life, and scarcely worse
Was Oswif's, and what shadow of a curse
Might hang o'er either house, was thought of now
As men think of a cloud the mountain's brow
Hides from their eyes an hour before the rain;
For so much love there was betwixt the twain,
Herdholt and Bathstead, that it well might last
Until the folk aforenamed were all passed
From out the world; but herein shall be shown
How the sky blackened, and the storm swept down.

The Prophecy of Guest the Wise.

Upon a day, amid the maids that spun
Within the bower at Bathstead, sat Gudrun,
Her father in the firth a-fishing was,
The while her mother through the meads did pass
About some homely work. So there she sat,
Nor set her hand to this work or to that,
And a half-frown was on her pensive face,
Nor did she heed the chatter of the place
As girl spake unto girl. Then did she hear
The sound of horse-hoofs swiftly drawing near,
And started up, and cried, "That shall be Guest,
Riding, as still his wont is, from the west
Unto the Thing, and this is just the day
When he is wont at Bathstead to make stay."

Then to the door she went, and with slim hand
Put it aback, and 'twixt the posts did stand,
And saw therewith a goodly company
Ride up the grey slopes leading from the sea.

That spring was she just come to her full height;
Low-bosomed yet she was, and slim and light,
Yet scarce might she grow fairer from that day;
Gold were the locks wherewith the wind did play,
Finer than silk, waved softly like the sea
After a three days' calm, and to her knee
Well-nigh they reached; fair were the white hands laid
Upon the door-posts where the dragons played;
Her brow was smooth now, and a smile began
To cross her delicate mouth, the snare of man;
For some thought rose within the heart of her
That made her eyes bright, her cheeks ruddier
Than was their wont, yet were they delicate
As are the changing steps of high heaven's gate;
Bluer than grey her eyes were; somewhat thin
Her marvellous red lips; round was her chin,
Cloven, and clear-wrought; like an ivory tower
Rose up her neck from love's white-veiléd bower.
But in such lordly raiment was she clad,
As midst its threads the scent of southlands had,
And on its hem the work of such-like hands
As deal with silk and gold in sunny lands.
Too dainty seemed her feet to come anear
The guest-worn threshold-stone. So stood she there,
And rough the world about her seemed to be,
A rude heap cast up from the weary sea.

But now the new-come folk, some twelve in all,
Drew rein before the doorway of the hall,
And she a step or two across the grass
Unto the leader of the men did pass,
A white-haired elder clad in kirtle red:
"Be welcome here, O Guest the Wise!" she said,
"My father honours me so much that I
Am bid to pray thee not to pass us by,
But bide here for a while; he says withal
That thou and he together in the hall
Are two wise men together, two who can
Talk cunningly about the ways of man."

Guest laughed, and leapt from off his horse, and said:
"Fair words from fair lips, and a goodly stead!
But unto Thickwood must I go to-night
To give my kinsman Armod some delight;
Nevertheless here will we rest awhile,
And thou and I with talk an hour beguile,
For so it is that all men say of thee,
'Not far off falls the apple from the tree'
That 'neath thy coif some day shall lie again
When he is dead, the wise old Oswif's brain."
With that he took her hand, and to the hall
She led him, and his fellows one and all
Leapt to the ground, and followed clattering
In through the porch, and many a goodly thing
There had they plenteously; but mid the noise
And rattling horns and laughter, with clear voice
Spake Gudrun unto Guest, and ever he
Smiled at her goodly sayings joyfully,
And yet at whiles grew grave; yea, and she too,
Though her eyes glistened, seemed as scarce she knew
The things she said. At last, amid their speech,
The old man stayed his hand as it did reach
Out to the beaker, and his grey eyes stared
As though unseen things to his soul were bared;
Then Gudrun waited trembling, till he said:

"Liest thou awake at midnight in thy bed,
Thinking of dreams dreamed in the winter-tide,
When the north-east, turned off the mountain-side,
Shook the stout timbers of the hall, as when
They shook in Norway ere the upland men
Bore axe against them?"
She spake low to him:
"So is it, but of these the most wax dim
When daylight comes again; but four there are—
Four dreams in one—that bring me yet great care,
Nor may I soon forget them, yea, they sink
Still deeper in my soul—but do thou drink,
And tell me merry tales; of what avail
To speak of things that make a maiden pale
And a man laugh?"
"Speak quick," he said, "before
This glimmer of a sight I have is o'er."

Then she delayed not, but in quick words said:
"Methought that with a coif upon my head
I stood upon a stream-side, and withal
Upon my heart the sudden thought did fall
How foul that coif was, and how ill it sat,
And though the folk beside me spoke 'gainst that,
Nevertheless, from off mine head I tore
The cursed thing, and cast it from the shore;
And glad at heart was I when it was gone,
And woke up laughing."
"Well, the second one,"
Said Guest; "Make good speed now, and tell me all!"

"This was the dream," she said, "that next did fall:
By a great water was I; on mine arm
A silver ring, that more my heart did charm
Than one might deem that such a small thing might;

My very own indeed seemed that delight,
And long I looked to have it; but as I
Stood and caressed the dear thing, suddenly
It slipped from off my arm, and straightway fell
Into the water: nor is more to tell
But that I wept thereat, and sorrowed sore
As for a friend that I should see no more."

"As great," said Guest, "is this thing as the last,
What follows after?"
"O'er the road I passed
Nigh Bathstead," said she, "in fair raiment clad,
And on mine arm a golden ring I had;
And seemly did I deem it, yet the love
I had therefor was not so much above
That wherewithal I loved the silver ring,
As gold is held by all a dearer thing
Than silver is; now, whatso worth it bore,
Methought that needs for longer than before
This ring should give me what it might of bliss;
But even as with foolish dreams it is
So was it now; falling I seemed to be,
And spread my arms abroad to steady me;
Upon a stone the ring smote, and atwain
It broke; and when I stooped the halves to gain,
Lo, blood ran out from either broken place;
Then as I gazed thereon I seemed to trace
A flaw within the craftsman's work, whereby
The fair thing brake; yea, withal presently
Yet other flaws therein could I discern;
And as I stood and looked, and sore did yearn,
Midst blind regrets, rather than raging pain,
For that fair thing I should not see again,
My eyes seemed opened, to my heart it came,
Spite of those flaws, that on me lay the blame
Why thus was spoiled that noble gift and rare,
Because therewith I dealt not with due care:
So with a sigh I woke."
"Ill fare," said Guest,
"Three of thy dreams, tell now about the rest."

"This is the last of the four dreams," she said;
"Methought I had a helm upon my head,
Wrought all of gold, with precious gems beset,
And pride and joy I had therein, and yet,
So heavy was it, that I scarce might hold
My head upright for that great weight of gold;
Yet for all that I laid no blame or wrong
Upon it, and I fain had kept it long;
But amid this, while least I looked therefor,
Something, I knew not what, the fair helm tore
From off mine head, and then I saw it swept
Into the firth, and when I would have wept
Then my voice failed me, and mine eyes were dry
Despite my heart; and therewith presently
I woke, and heard withal the neat-herd's song
As o'er the hard white snow he went along
Unto the byre, shouldering his load of hay;
Then knew I the beginning of the day,
And to the window went and saw afar
The wide firth, black beneath the morning-star,
And all the waste of snow, and saw the man
Dark on the slope; 'twixt the dead earth and wan,
And the dark vault of star-besprinkled sky,
Croaking, a raven toward the sea did fly—
—With that I fell a yearning for the spring,
And all the pleasant things that it should bring,
And lay back in my bed and shut my eyes,
To see what pictures to my heart would rise,
And slept, but dreamed no more; now spring is here—
Thou know'st perchance, made wise with many a year,
What thing it is I long for; but to me
All grows as misty as the autumn sea
'Neath the first hoar-frost, and I name it not,
The thing wherewith my wondering heart is hot."

Then Guest turned round upon her, with a smile
Beholding her fair face a little while,
And as he looked on her she hid her eyes
With slim hands, but he saw the bright flush rise,
Despite of them, up to her forehead fair;
Therewith he sighed as one who needs must bear
A heavy burden.
"Since thou thus hast told
Thy dreams," he said, "scarce may I now withhold
The tale of what mine eyes have seen therein;
Yet little from my foresight shalt thou win,
Since both the blind, and they who see full well,
Go the same road, and leave a tale to tell
Of interwoven miseries, lest they,
Who after them a while on earth must stay,
Should have no pleasure in the winter night,
When this man's pain is made that man's delight."

He smiled an old man's smile as thus he spake,
Then said, "But I must hasten ere it break
The thin sharp thread of light that yet I see—
—Methinks a stirring life shall hap to thee.
Thou shalt be loved and love; wrongs shalt thou give,
Wrongs shalt thou take, and therewithal outlive
Both wrongs, and love, and joy, and dwell alone
When all the fellows of thy life are gone.
Nay, think not I can tell thee much of this,
How it shall hap, the sorrow or the bliss;
Only foreshadowing of outward things,
Great, and yet not the greatest, dream-lore brings.

"For whereas of the ill coif thou didst dream,
That such a husband unto me doth seem
As thou shalt think mates thee but ill enow,
Nor shall love-longings bind thee; so shalt thou
By thine own deed shake off this man from thee.

"But next the ring of silver seems to me
Another husband, loved and loving well;
But even as the ring from off thee fell
Into the water, so it is with him,
The sea shall make his love and promise dim.

"But for the gold ring; thou shalt wed again,
A worthier man belike—yet well-nigh vain
My strivings are to see what means the gold
Thou lovedst not more than silver: I am old
And thou art very young; hadst thou my sight,
Perchance herein thou wouldst have more of might.
But my heart says, that on the land there comes
A faith that telleth of more lovesome homes
For dead men, than we deemed of heretofore,
And that this man full well shall know that lore.
But whereas blood from out the ring did run,
By the sword's edge his life shall be foredone:
Then for the flaws—see thou thyself to these!
Thou knowest how a thing full well may please,
When first thou hast it in thine hold, until
Up to the surface float the seeds of ill,
And vain regret o'er all thy life is spread.

"But for the heavy helm that bowed thine head—
This, thy last husband, a great chief shall be,
And hold a helm of terror over thee
Though thou shalt love him: at the end of life
His few last minutes shall he spend in strife
With the wild waves of Hwammfirth, and in vain;
For him too shall the white sea-goddess gain.

"So is thy dream areded; but these things
Shall hang above thee, as on unheard wings
The kestrel hangs above the mouse; nor more
As erst I said shalt thou gain by my lore
Than at the end of life, perchance, a smile
That fate with sight and blindness did beguile
Thine eyes in such sort—that thou knewst the end,
But not the way whereon thy feet did wend
On any day amid the many years,
Wherethrough thou waitedst for the flood of tears,
The dreariness that at some halting-place,
Waited in turn to change thy smiling face.
Be merry yet! these things shall not be all
That unto thee in this thy life shall fall."

Amid these latter words of his, the may
From her fair face had drawn her hands away,
And sat there with fixed eyes, and face grown pale,
As one who sees the corner of the veil,
That hideth strange things, lifted for a while;
But when he ceased, she said with a faint smile
And trembling lips:
"Thanked be thou; well it is!
From thee I get no promise of vain bliss,
And constant joy; a tale I might have had
From flattering lips to make my young heart glad—
Yea, have my thanks!—yet wise as thou mayst be,
Mayst thou not dimly through these tangles see?"

He answered nought, but sat awhile with eyes
Distraught and sad, and face made over wise
With many a hard vain struggle; but at last
As one who from him a great weight doth cast,
He rose and spake to her:
"Wild words, fair may,
Now time it is that we were on our way."
Then unto him her visage did she turn,
In either cheek a bright red spot did burn,
Her teeth were set hard, and her brow was knit
As though she saw her life and strove with it.
Yet presently but common words she spake,
And bid him bide yet for her father's sake,
To make him joyful when the boards were laid;
But certainly, whatever words she said,
She heeded little; only from her tongue
By use and wont clear in his ears they rung.
Guest answered as before, that he would ride,
Because that night at Thickwood must he bide;
So silent now with wandering weary eyes
She watched his men do on their riding guise,
Then led him from the hall but listlessly,
As though she heeded nought where she might be.
So forth he rode, but turned and backward gazed
Before his folk the garth-gate latch had raised,
And saw her standing yet anigh the hall,
With her long shadow cast upon its wall,
As with her eyes turned down upon the ground
A long lock of her hair she wound and wound
About her hand. Then turning once again,
He passed the gate and shook his bridle-rein.

Now but a short way had he gone ere he
Beheld a man draw nigh their company,
Who, when they met, with fair words Guest did greet,
And said that Olaf Peacock bade him meet
Him and his men, and bid them to his stead:
"And well ye wot, O Goodman Guest," he said,
'That all day long it snoweth meat and drink
At Herdholt, and the gurgle and the clink
Of mead and horns, the harp alone doth still."
Guest laughed, and said, "Well, be that as it will,
Get swiftly back, and say that I will come
To look upon the marvels of his home
And hear his goodly voice; but may not bide
The night through, for to Thickwood must I ride."
Then the man turned and smote his horse; but they
Rode slowly by the borders of the bay
Upon that fresh and sunny afternoon,
Noting the sea-birds' cry and surf's soft tune,

Until at last into the dale they came,
And saw the gilt roof-ridge of Herdholt flame
In the bright sunlight over the fresh grass,
O'er which the restless white-woolled lambs did pass
And querulous grey ewes; and wide around,
Near and far up the dale, they heard the sound
Of lowing kine, and the blithe neat-herd's voice,
For in those days did all things there rejoice.
Now presently from out the garth they saw
A goodly company unto them draw,
And thitherward came Olaf and his men;
So joyous greeting was betwixt them when
They met, and side by side the two chiefs rode,
Right glad at heart unto the fair abode.

Great-limbed was Olaf Hauskuldson, well knit,
And like a chief upon his horse did sit;
Clear-browed and wide-eyed was he, smooth of skin
Through fifty rough years; of his mother's kin,
The Erse king's daughter, did his short lip tell,
And dark-lashed grey-blue eyes; like a clear bell
His voice was yet, despite of waves and wind,
And such a goodly man you scarce might find,
As for his years, in all the northern land.
He held a gold-wrought spear in his right hand,
A chief's gold ring his left arm did upbear,
And as a mighty king's was all his gear,
Well shaped of Flanders' cloth, and silk and gold.
Thus they their way up to the garth did hold,
And Thord the Short, Guest's son, was next thereby,
A brisk man and a brave; so presently
They passed the garth-wall, and drew rein before
The new built hall's well carven, fair porch-door,
And Guest laughed out with pleasure, to behold
Its goodly fashion, as the Peacock told
With what huge heed and care the place was wrought,
And of the Norway earl's great wood, he brought
Over the sea; then in they went and Guest
Gazed through the cool dusk, till his eyes did rest
Upon the noble stories, painted fair
On the high panelling and roof-boards there;
For over the high-seat, in his ship there lay
The gold-haired Baldur, god of the dead day,
The spring-flowers round his high pile, waiting there
Until the Gods thereto the torch should bear;
And they were wrought on this side and on that,
Drawing on towards him. There was Frey, and sat
On the gold-bristled boar, who first they say
Ploughed the brown earth, and made it green for Frey.
Then came dark-bearded Niörd; and after him
Freyia, thin-robed, about her ankles slim
The grey cats playing. In another place
Thor's hammer gleamed o'er Thor's red-bearded face;
And Heimdall, with the gold horn slung behind,
That in the God's-dusk he shall surely wind,
Sickening all hearts with fear; and last of all
Was Odin's sorrow wrought upon the wall,
As slow-paced, weary-faced, he went along,
Anxious with all the tales of woe and wrong
His ravens, Thought and Memory, bring to him.

Guest looked on these until his eyes grew dim,
Then turned about, and had no word to praise,
So wrought in him the thought of those strange days,
Done with so long ago. But furthermore
Upon the other side, the deeds of Thor
Were duly done; the fight in the far sea
With him who rings the world's iniquity,
The Midgard Worm; strife in the giants' land,
With snares and mockeries thick on either hand,
And dealings with the Evil One who brought
Death even amid the Gods—all these well wrought
Did Guest behold, as in a dream, while still
His joyous men the echoing hall did fill
With many-voiced strange clamour, as of these
They talked, and stared on all the braveries.
Then to the presses in the cloth-room there
Did Olaf take him, and showed hangings fair
Brought from the southlands far across the sea,
And English linen and fair napery,
And Flemish cloth; then back into the hall
He led him, and took arms from off the wall,
And let the mail-coat rings run o'er his hands,
And strung strange bows brought from the fiery lands.
Then through the butteries he made him pass,
And, smiling, showed what winter stock yet was;
Fish, meal, and casks of wine, and goodly store
Of honey, that the bees had grumbled o'er
In clover fields of Kent. Out went they then
And saw in what wise Olaf's serving-men
Dealt with the beasts, and what fair stock he had,
And how the maids were working blithe and glad
Within the women's chamber. Then at last
Guest smiled, and said:
"Right fair is all thou hast,
A noble life thou livest certainly,
And in such wise as now, still may it be,
Nor mayst thou know beginning of ill days!
Now let it please thee that we go our ways,
E'en as I said, for the sun falleth low."

"So be it then," said he. "Nor shalt thou go
Giftless henceforth; and I will go with thee
Some little way, for we my sons may see;
And fain I am to know how to thine eyes
They seem; because I know thee for most wise,
And that the cloud of time from thee hides less
Than from most men, of woe or happiness."

With that he gave command, and men brought forth
Two precious things; a hat of goodly worth,
Of fur of Russia, with a gold chain wound
Thrice round it, and a coin of gold that bound
The chain's end in the front, and on the same
A Greek king's head was wrought, of mighty fame
In olden time; this unto Guest he gave,
And smiled to see his deep-set eyes and grave
Gleam out with joy thereover: but to Thord,
Guest's son, he gave a well-adornéd sword
And English-'broidered belt; and then once more
They mounted by the goodly carven door,
And to their horses gat all Guest's good men,
And forth they rode toward Laxriver: but when
They had just overtopped a low knoll's brow,
Olaf cried out, "There play hot hearts enow
In the cold waves!" Then Guest looked, and afar
Beheld the tide play on the sandy bar
About the stream's mouth, as the sea waves rushed
In over it and back the land-stream pushed;
But in the dark wide pool mid foam-flecks white,
Beneath the slanting afternoon sunlight,
He saw white bodies sporting, and the air
Light from the south-west up the slopes did bear
Sound of their joyous cries as there they played.

Then said he, "Goodman, thou art well apaid
Of thy fair sons, if they shall deal as well
With earth as water."
"Nought there is to tell
Of great deeds at their hands as yet," said he;
"But look you, how they note our company!"

For waist-high from the waves one rose withal,
And sent a shrill voice like a sea-mew's call
Across the river, then all turned toward land,
And beat the waves to foam with foot and hand,
And certes kept no silence; up the side
They scrambled, and about the shore spread wide
Seeking their raiment, and the yellowing sun
Upon the line of moving bodies shone,
As running here and there with laugh and shout
They flung the linen and grey cloth about,
Yet spite of all their clamour clad them fast.
So Guest and Olaf o'er the green slopes passed
At sober pace, the while the other men
Raced down to meet the swimmers.
"Many then
There are, who have no part or lot in thee
Among these lads," said Guest.
"Yea, such there be,"
Said Olaf, "sons of dale-dwellers hereby;
But Kiartan rules the swimming."
Earnestly
Guest gazed upon the lads as they drew near,
And scarcely now he seemed the words to hear
That Olaf spake, who talked about his race
And how they first had dwelling in that place;
But at the last Guest turned his horse about
Up stream, and drew rein, yet, as one in doubt,
Looked o'er his shoulder at the youths withal;
But nought said Olaf, doubting what should fall
From those wise lips.
Then Guest spake, "Who are these?
Tell me their names; yon lad upon his knees,
Turning the blue cloak over with his hands,
While over him a sturdy fellow stands,
Talking belike?"
"Hauskuld, my youngest son,"
Said Olaf, "kneels there, but the standing one
Is An the Black, my house-carle, a stout man."

"Good," Guest said; "name the one who e'en now ran
Through upraised hands a glittering silver chain,
And, as we look now, gives it back again
Unto a red-haired youth, tall, fair, and slim."

"Haldor it was who gave the chain to him,
And Helgi took it," Olaf said.
Then Guest:
"There kneeleth one in front of all the rest,
Less clad than any there, and hides from me
Twain who are sitting nigher to the sea?"

Then Olaf looked with shaded eyes and said:
"Steinthor, the sluggard, is it; by my head
He hideth better men! nay, look now, look!"

Then toward the stream his spear-butt Olaf shook,
As Steinthor rose, and gat somewhat aside,
And showed the other twain he first did hide.
On a grey stone anigh unto the stream
Sat a tall youth whose golden head did gleam
In the low sun; half covered was his breast,
His right arm bare as yet, a sword did rest
Upon his knees, and some half-foot of it
He from the sheath had drawn; a man did sit
Upon the grass before him; slim was he,
Black-haired and tall, and looked up smilingly
Into the other's face, with one hand laid
Upon the sword-sheath nigh the broad grey blade,
And seemed as though he listened.
Then spake Guest:
"No need, O friend, to ask about the rest,
Since I have seen these; for without a word
Kiartan I name the man who draws the sword
From out the sheath, and low down in the shade
Before him Bodli Thorleikson is laid.
But tell me of that sword, who bore it erst?"

Then Olaf laughed. "Some call that sword accursed;
Bodli now bears it, which the Eastlander

Geirmund, my daughter's husband, once did wear.
Hast thou not heard the tale? he won the maid
By my wife's word, wherefore with gold he paid,
Or so I deemed; but whereas of good kin
The man was, and the women hot herein,
I stood not in the way; well, but his love,
Whate'er it was, quenched not his will to rove;
He left her, but would nowise leave the sword,
And so she helped herself, and for reward
Got that, and a curse with it, babblers say.
—Let see if it prevail 'gainst my good day!"

Guest answered nought at all, his head was turned
Eastward, away from where the low sun burned
Above the swimmers. Olaf spake once more:
"Wise friend, thou thus hast heard their names told o'er,
How thinkest thou? hast thou the heart to tell
Which in the years to come shall do right well?"

Guest spake not for a while, and then he said,
But yet not turning any more his head:
"Surely of this at least thou wouldst be glad,
If Kiartan while he lived more glory had
Than any man now waxing in the land."

Then even as he spoke he raised his hand
And smote his horse, and rode upon his way
With no word more; neither durst Olaf stay
His swift departing, doubting of his mood;
For though indeed the word he spake was good,
Yet some vague fear he seemed to leave behind,
And Olaf scarce durst seek, lest he should find
Some ill thing lurking by his glory's side.
But after Guest his son and men did ride,
And forth to Thickwood with no stay they went.
But now, the journey and the day nigh spent,
Unto his father as they rode turned Thord,
With mind to say to him some common word,
But stared astonished, for the great tears ran
Over the wrinkled cheeks of the old man,
Yea, and adown his beard, nor shame had he
That Thord in such a plight his face should see,
At last he spake:
"Thou wonderest, O my son,
To see the tears fall down from such an one
As I am—folly is it in good sooth
Bewraying inward grief; but pain and ruth
Work in me so, I may not hold my peace
About the woes, that as thy years increase
Thou shalt behold fall on the country-side—
—But me the grey cairn ere that day shall hide—
Fair men and women have I seen to-day,
Yet I weep not because these pass away,
Sad though that is, but rather weep for this,
That they know not upon their day of bliss
How their worn hearts shall fail them ere they die,
How sore the weight of woe on them shall lie,
Which no sigh eases, wherewithal no hope,
No pride, no rage, shall make them fit to cope.
Remember what folk thou this day hast seen,
And in what joyous steads thy feet have been,
Then think of this!—that men may look to see
Love slaying love, and ruinous victory,
And truth called lies, and kindness turned to hate,
And prudence sowing seeds of all debate!
Son, thou shalt live to hear when I am dead
Of Bodli standing over Kiartan's head,
His friend, his foster-brother, and his bane,
That he in turn e'en such an end may gain.
Woe worth the while! forget it, and be blind!
Look not before thee! the road left behind,
Let that be to thee as a tale well told
To make thee merry when thou growest old!"

So spake he; but by this time had they come
Unto the wood that lay round Armod's home,
So on the tree-beset and narrow way
They entered now, and left behind the day;
And whatso things thenceforth to Guest befell,
No more of him the story hath to tell.

Gudrun twice Wedded, Widowed, and Wooed of Kiartan.

So wore the time away, nor long it was
Ere somewhat of Guest's forecast came to pass.
Drawn by her beauty, Thorvald wooed Gudrun;
Saying withal that he was such an one
As fainer was to wed a wife than lands,
Readier by far to give forth from his hands
That which he had, than take aught of her kin.
And in such wise he did not fail to win
His fond desire, and, therewith, wretched life.
For she who deemed nought worth so much of strife
As to say "no" for ever, being wed, found
How the chain galled whereto she now was bound,
And more and more began to look on him
With hate that would be scorn, with eyes grown dim
For hope of change that came not, and lips set
For ever with the stifling of regret.
Coarse Thorvald was, and rough and passionate,
And little used on change of days to wait;
And as she ever gloomed before his eyes,
Rage took the place of the first grieved surprise,
Wherewith he found that he, who needs must love,
Could get no love in turn, nay, nor e'en move
Her heart to kindness: then as nothing strange
Still with sad loathing looks she took the change
She noted in him, as if all were done

Between them, and no deed beneath the sun
That he could do would now be worse to her.
Judge if the hot heart of the man could bear
Such days as these! Upon a time it fell
That he, most fain indeed to love her well,
Would she but turn to him, had striven sore
To gain her love, and yet gat nothing more
Than a faint smile of scorn, 'neath eyes whose gaze
Seemed fixed for ever on the hoped-for days,
Wherein he no more should have part or lot;
Then mingled hate with love in him, and hot
His heart grew past all bearing; round about
He stared, as one who hears the eager shout
Of closing foes, when he to death is brought;
In his fierce heart thought crowded upon thought,
Till he saw not and heard not, but rose up
And cast upon the floor his half-filled cup,
And crying out, smote her upon the face;
Then strode adown the hushed and crowded place,
(For meal-time was it,) till he reached the door;
Then gat his horse, and over hill and moor,
Scarce knowing where he went, rode furiously.

But in the hall, folk turned them round to see
What thing Gudrun would do, who for a while
Sat pale and silent, with a deadly smile
Upon her lips; then called to where she sat
Folk from the hall, and talked of this and that
Gaily, as one who hath no care or pain:
Yea, when the goodman gat him back again
She met him changed, so that he well-nigh thought
That better days his hasty blow had brought.
And still as time wore on, day after day
Wondering, he saw her seeming blithe and gay;
So he, though sore misdoubting him of this,
Took what he might of pleasure and of bliss,
And put thought back. So time wore till the spring,
And then the goodman rode unto the Thing,
Not over light of heart, or free from fear,
Though his wife's face at parting was all clear
Of frown or sullenness; but he being gone,
Next morn Gudrun rode with one man alone
Forth unto Bathstead; there her tale she told,
And as in those days law strained not to hold
Folk whom love held not, or some common tie,
So her divorce was set forth speedily,
For mighty were her kin.
And now once more
At Bathstead did she dwell, free as before,
And, smiling, heard of how her husband fared
When by the Hill of Laws he stood and heard
The words, that he belike half thought to hear,
Which took from him a thing once held so dear,
That all was nought thereby.
Now wise ones tell
That there was one who used to note her well
Within her husband's hall, and many say
That talk of love they had before the day
That she went back to Bathstead; how that was
I know not surely; but it came to pass
That scarcely had abated the first rage
Of her old mate, and scarce less like a cage
Of red-hot iron 'gan to feel his life,
Ere this man, Thord, had won Gudrun to wife;
So, since the man was brisk and brave and fair,
And she had known him when her days were drear,
And turned with hope and longing to his eyes,
Kind amid hard things, in most joyous wise
Their life went, and she deemed she loved him well;
And the strange things that Guest did once foretell,
Which morn and noon and eve she used to set
Before her eyes, she now would fain forget;
Alas! forgotten or remembered, still
Midst joy or sorrow fate shall work its will;
Three months they lived in joy and peace enow,
Till on a June night did the south-west blow
The rainy rack o'er Gudrun's sleeping head,
While in the firth was rolled her husband dead
Toward the black cliffs; drowned was he, says my tale,
By wizard's spells amidst a summer gale.

Then back to Bathstead Gudrun came again,
To sit with fierce heart brooding o'er her pain,
While life and time seemed made to torture her,
That she the utmost of all pain might bear,
To please she knew not whom; and yet mid this,
And all her raging for the vanished bliss,
Would Guest's words float up to her memory,
And quicken cold life; then would she cast by
As something vile the comfort that they brought,
Yet, none the less, still stronger grew that thought,
Unheeded, and unchidden therefore, round
The weary wall of woe, her life that bound.

So wore the months; spring with its longings came,
And now in every mouth was Kiartan's name,
And daily now must Gudrun's dull ears bear
Tales of the prowess of his youth to hear,
While in his cairn forgotten lay her love.
For this man, said they, all men's hearts did move,
Nor yet might envy cling to such an one,
So far beyond all dwellers 'neath the sun;
Great was he, yet so fair of face and limb
That all folk wondered much, beholding him,
How such a man could be; no fear he knew,
And all in manly deeds he could outdo;
Fleet-foot, a swimmer strong, an archer good,
Keen-eyed to know the dark waves' changing mood;
Sure on the crag, and with the sword so skilled,
That when he played therewith the air seemed filled

With light of gleaming blades; therewith was he
Of noble speech, though says not certainly
My tale, that aught of his be left behind
With rhyme and measure deftly intertwined;
Well skilled was he, too, in the craftsman's lore
To deal with iron mid the stithy's roar,
And many a sword-blade knew his heavy hand.
Shortly, if he amid ten kings should stand,
All men would think him worthier man than they;
And yet withal it was his daily way
To be most gentle both of word and deed,
And ever folk would seek him in their need,
Nor was there any child but loved him well.

Such things about him ever would men tell,
Until their hearts swelled in them as they thought
How great a glory to their land was brought,
Seeing that this man was theirs. Such love and praise
Kiartan's beginning had in those fair days,
While Gudrun sat sick-eyed, and hearkened this,
Still brooding on the late-passed days of bliss,
And thinking still how worthless such things were.

But now when midsummer was drawing near,
As on an eve folk sat within the hall,
Man unto man far off did they hear call,
And then the sound of horse-hoofs; Oswif rose,
And went into the porch to look for those
Who might be coming, and at last folk heard,
Close to the porch, the new-come travellers' word,
And turned to meet them; Gudrun sat alone
High on the daïs when all folk were gone,
And playing with her golden finger-rings,
Set all her heart to think of bygone things,
Till hateful seemed all hopes, all thoughts of men.

Yet did she turn unto their voices, when
Folk back again into the hall did crowd,
Torch-litten now, laughing and talking loud,
Then as the guests adown the long hall drew,
Olaf the Peacock presently she knew,
Hand in hand with her father; but behind
Came two young men; then rose up to her mind,
Against her will, the tales of Kiartan told,
Because she deemed the one, whose hair of gold
In the new torch-light gleamed, was even he,
And that the black-haired high-browed one must be
Bodli, the son of Thorleik; but with that
Up to the place where listlessly she sat,
They came, and on her feet she now must stand
To welcome them; then Olaf took her hand,
And looked on her with eyes compassionate,
And said:

"O Gudrun, ill has been thy fate,
But surely better days shall soon be thine,
For not for nought do eyes like thine eyes shine
Upon the hard world; thou shalt bless us yet
In many a way and all thy woes forget."

She answered nought, but drew her hand away,
And heavier yet the weight upon her lay
That thus men spake of her. But, turning round,
Kiartan upon the other hand she found,
Gazing upon her with wild hungry eyes
And parted lips; then did strange joy surprise
Her listless heart, and changed her old world was;
Ere she had time to think, all woe did pass
Away from her, and all her life grew sweet,
And scarce she felt the ground beneath her feet,
Or knew who stood around, or in what place
Of heaven or earth she was; soft grew her face;
In tears that fell not yet, her eyes did swim,
As, trembling, she reached forth her hand to him,
And with the shame of love her smooth cheeks burned,
And her lips quivered, as if sore they yearned
For words they had not learned, and might not know
Till night and loneliness their form should show.

But Kiartan's face a happy smile did light,
Kind, loving, confident; good hap and might
Seemed in his voice as now he spake, and said:

"They say the dead for thee will ne'er be dead,
And on this eve I thought in sooth to have
Labour enow to draw thee from the grave
Of the old days; but thou rememberest,
Belike, days earlier yet, that men call best
Of all days, when as younglings erst we met.
Thou thinkest now thou never didst forget
This face of mine, since now most certainly
The eyes are kind wherewith thou lookst on me."

A shade came o'er her face, but quickly passed.
"Yea," said she, "if such pleasant days might last,
As when we wandered laughing hand in hand
Along the borders of the shell-strewn strand."

She wondered at the sound of her own voice,
She chid her heart that it must needs rejoice,
She marvelled why her soul with fear was filled;
But quickly every questioning was stilled
As he sat down by her.

Old Oswif smiled
To see her sorrow in such wise beguiled,
And Olaf laughed for joy, and many a thought
Of happy loves to Bodli's heart was brought
As by his friend he sat, and saw his face
So bright with bliss; and all the merry place
Ran over with goodwill that sight to see,
And the hours passed in great festivity.

At last beneath the glimmer of the moon,
Fanned by the soft sea-wind that tempers June,
Homeward they rode, sire, son and foster-son,
Kiartan half joyful that the eve was done,
And he had leisure for himself to weave
Tales of the joyful way that from that eve
Should lead to perfect bliss; Bodli no less
Rejoicing in his fellow's happiness,
Dreaming of such-like joy to come to him,
And Olaf, thinking how that nowise dim
The glory of his line through these should grow.

But while in peace these through the night did go,
Vexed by new thoughts and old thoughts, Gudrun lay
Upon her bed: she watched him go away,
And her heart sank within her, and there came,
With pain of that departing, pity and shame,
That struggling with her love yet made it strong,
That called her longing blind, yet made her long
Yet more for more desire, what seeds soe'er
Of sorrow, hate, and ill were hidden there.
So with her strong heart wrestled love, till she
Sank 'neath the hand of sleep, and quietly
Beneath the new-risen sun she lay at rest,
The bed-gear fallen away from her white breast,
One arm deep buried in her hair, one spread
Abroad, across the 'broideries of the bed,
A smile upon her lips, and yet a tear,
Scarce dry, but stayed anigh her dainty ear—
How fair, how soft, how kind she seemed that morn,
Ere she anew to love and life was born.

A little space to part these twain indeed
Was seven short miles of hill and moor and mead
And soon the threshold of the Bathstead hall
Knew nigh as much of Kiartan's firm football
As of the sweep of Gudrun's kirtle-hem,
And sweet past words to tell life grew to them;
Sweet the awaking in the morn, when lay
Below the hall the narrow winding way,
The friend that led, the foe that kept apart;
And sweet the joyful flutter of the heart
Anigh the door, ere clinging memory
Gave place to rapturous sight, and eye met eye;
Sweet the long hours of converse when each word
Like fairest music still seemed doubly heard,
Caught by the ear and clung to by the heart;
Yea, even most sweet the minute they must part,
Because the veil, that so oft time must draw
Before them, fell, and clear without a flaw,
Their hearts saw love, that moment they did stand
Ere lip left lip, or hand fell down from hand;
Yea, that passed o'er, still sweet and bitter-sweet
The yearning pain that stayed the lingering feet
Upon the threshold, and the homeward way;
And silent chamber covered up from day
For thought of words unsaid—ah, sweet the night
Amidst its dreams of manifold delight!

And yet sometimes pangs of perplexéd pain
Would torture Gudrun, as she thought again
On Guest and his forecasting of her dream;
And through the dark of days to come would gleam
Fear, like a flame of hell shot suddenly
Up through spring meadows 'twixt fair tree and tree,
Though little might she see the flaws, whereof
That past dream warned her, midst her dream of love;
And whatso things her eyes refused to see,
Made wise by fear, none others certainly
Might see in love so seeming smooth as this,
That looked to all men like the door of bliss
Unto the twain, and to the country-side
Good hope and joy, that thus so fast were tied
The bonds 'twixt two such houses as were these,
And folk before them saw long years of peace.

Of Bodli Thorleikson the story says,
That he, o'ershadowed still by Kiartan's praise,
Was second but to him; although, indeed,
He, who perchance the love of men did need
More than his fellow, less their hearts might move;
Yet fair to all men seemed the trust and love
Between the friends, and fairer unto none
Than unto Olaf, who scarce loved his son
More than his brother's son; now seemed it too,
That this new love closer the kinsmen drew
Than e'en before, and whatso either did
The other knew, and scarce their thoughts seemed hid
One from the other.
So as day by day
Went Kiartan unto Bathstead, still the way
Seemed shorter if his friend beside him rode;
Then might he ease his soul of that great load
Of love unsatisfied, by words, and take
Mockeries in turn, grown sweet for that name's sake,
They wrapped about, or glow with joy to hear
The praises of the heart he held so dear,
And laugh with joy and pleasure of his life,
To note how Bodli's heart withal, seemed rife
With love that his love kindled, though as yet
It wandered, on no heart of woman set.
So Bodli, nothing loth, went many a day,
Whenso they would, to make the lovers gay,
Whenso they would, to get him gone, that these
E'en with such yearning words their souls might please
As must be spoken, but sound folly still
To aught but twain, because no tongue hath skill
To tell their meaning: kinder, Kiartan deemed,

Grew Bodli day by day, and ever seemed
Well-nigh as happy as the loving twain,
And unto Bodli life seemed nought but gain,
And fair the days were.
On a day it fell
As the three talked, they 'gan in sport to tell
The names o'er of such women good and fair,
As in the land that tide unwedded were,
Naming a mate for Bodli, and still he
Must laugh and shake his head;
"Then over sea,"
Quoth Kiartan, "mayhap such an one there is
That thou mayst deem the getting of her bliss;
Go forth and win her with the rover's sword!"

Then Bodli laughed, and cast upon the board
The great grey blade and ponderous iron hilt,
All unadorned, the yoke-fellow of guilt,
And said, "Go, sword, and fetch me home a bride!
But here in Iceland have I will to bide
With those that love me, till the fair days change."

Then Gudrun said, "Things have there been more strange,
Than that we three should sit above the oars,
The while on even keel 'twixt the low shores
Our long-ship breasts the Thames flood, or the Seine.
Methinks in biding here is little gain,
Cooped up in this cold corner of the world."

Then up sprang Kiartan, seized the sword, and hurled
Its weight aloft, and caught it by the hilt
As down it fell, and cried, "Would that the tilt
Were even now being rigged above the ship!
Would that we stood to see the oars first dip
In the green waves! nay, rather would that we
Above the bulwarks now saw Italy,
With all its beacons flaring! Sheathe thy sword,
Fair foster-brother, till I say the word
That draws it forth; and, Gudrun, never fear
That thou a word or twain of me shalt hear,
E'en if the birds must bear them o'er the sea."

Her eyes were fixed upon him lovingly
As thus he spake, and Bodli smiling saw
Her hand to Kiartan's ever nigher draw;
Then he rose up and sheathed the sword, and said,
"Nay, rather if I be so hard to wed,
I yet must think of roving, so I go
To talk to Oswif, all the truth to know
About the news the chapmen carried here,
That Olaf Tryggvison his sword doth rear
'Gainst Hacon and his fortune."
Therewithal
He laughed, and gat him swiftly from the hall,
And found the old man, nor came back again
Until through sun and shadow had the twain
Sat long together, and the hall 'gan fill.
Then did he deem his friend sat somewhat still,
And something strange he saw in Gudrun's eyes
As she gazed on him; nor did fail to rise
In his own heart the shadow of a shade,
That made him deem the world less nobly made
And yet was like to pleasure. On the way
Back home again, not much did Kiartan say,
And what he spake was well-nigh mockery
Of speech, wherewith he had been wont to free
His heart from longings grown too sweet to bear.
But time went on, and still the days did wear
With little seeming change; if love grew cold
In Kiartan's heart one day, the next o'er bold,
O'er frank, he noted not who might be by,
When he unto his love was drawing nigh;
Gudrun gloomed not; as merry as before
Did Bodli come and go 'twixt dais and door.
Only perchance a little oftener they
Fell upon talk of the fair lands that lay
Across the seas, and sometimes would a look
Cross Gudrun's face that seemed a half rebuke
To Kiartan, as all over-eagerly
He talked about the life beyond the sea,
As thereof he had heard the stories tell.
Then Bodli sometimes into musings fell,
So dreamlike, that he might not tell his thought
When he again to common life was brought.

So passed the seasons, but in autumn-tide
The foster-brothers did to Burgfirth ride,
Unto a ship new come to White-river;
Talk with the outland chapmen had they there,
And Kiartan bade the Captain in the end
Back into Herdholt as his guest to wend;
And nothing loth he went with him; and now
Great tidings thereupon began to show
Of Hacon slain, his son thrust from the land,
And Norway in fair peace beneath the hand
Of Olaf Tryggvison; nor did he fail
To tell about the king full many a tale,
And praise him for the noblest man, that e'er
Had held the tiller, or cast forth the spear:
And Kiartan listened eagerly, yet seemed
As if amid the tale he well-nigh dreamed;
And now withal, when he to Bathstead went,
Less than before would talk of his intent
To see the outlands, to his listening love;
And when at whiles she spake to him thereof,
Lightly he answered her, and smile or kiss
Would change their talk to idle words of bliss:
Less of her too to Bodli now he spake,
Although this other (for her beauty's sake,

He told himself) to hear of her was fain ;
And he, for his part, sometimes felt a pain,
As though the times were changing over fast,
When Kiartan let the word of his go past
Unnoted, that in other days belike
Had nowise failed from out his heart to strike
The sparks of lovesome praise.
But now Yule-tide
Was come at last, and folk from far and wide
Went to their neighbours' feasts, and as wont was
All Bathstead into Herdholt hall did pass,
And the feast lasted long, and all folk gat
Things that their souls desired, and Gudrun sat
In the high-seat beside the goodwife there.

But ever now her wary ears did hear
The new king's name bandied from mouth to mouth,
And talk of those new-comers from the south ;
And through her anxious heart a sharp pain smote
As Kiartan's face she eagerly 'gan note
And sighed ; because, leaned forward on the board,
He sat, with eager face hearkening each word,
Nor speaking aught ; then long with hungry eyes
She sat regarding him, nor yet would rise
A word unto her lips : and all the while
Bodli gazed on them with a fading smile
About his lips, and eyes that ever grew
More troubled still, until he hardly knew
What folk were round about.
So passed away
Yule-tide at Herdholt, cold day following day,
Till spring was gone, and Gudrun had not failed
To win both many days where joy prevailed,
And many a pang of fear ; till so it fell
That in the summer, whereof now we tell,
Upon a day in blithe mood Kiartan came
To Bathstead, not as one who looks for blame,
And Bodli with him, sad-eyed, silent, dull,
Noted of Gundrun, who no less was full
Of merry talk, yea, more than her wont was.
But as the hours toward eventide did pass,
Said Kiartan :
"Love, make we the most of bliss,
For though, indeed, not the last day this is
Whereon we twain shall meet in such a wise,
Yet shalt thou see me soon in fighting guise,
And hear the horns blow up our *Loth to go*,
For in White-River"—
"Is it even so,"
She broke in, "that these feet abide behind?
Men call me hard, but thou hast known me kind ;
Men call me fair, my body give I thee ;
Men call me dainty, let the rough salt sea
Deal with me as it will, so thou be near!
Let me share glory with thee, and take fear
That thy heart throws aside!"
Hand joined to hand,
As one who prays, and trembling, did she stand
With parted lips, and pale and weary-faced.
But up and down the hall-floor Bodli paced
With clanking sword, and brows set in a frown,
And scarce less pale than she. The sun low down
Shone through the narrow windows of the hall,
And on the gold upon her breast did fall,
And gilt her slim clasped hands.
There Kiartan stood
Gazing upon her in strange wavering mood,
Now longing sore to clasp her to his heart,
And pray her, too, that they might ne'er depart,
Now well-nigh ready to say such a word
As cutteth love across as with a sword ;
So fought love in him with the craving vain
The love of all the wondering world to gain,
Though such he named it not. And so at last
His eyes upon the pavement did he cast,
And knit his brow as though some word to say ;
Then fell her outstretched hands, she cried :
"Nay, nay!
Thou need'st not speak, I will not ask thee twice
To take a gift, a good gift, and be wise ;
I know my heart, thou know'st it not ; farewell,
Maybe that other tales the Skalds shall tell
Than of thy great deeds."
Still her face was pale,
As with a sound betwixt a sigh and wail,
She brushed by Bodli, who, aghast, did stand
With open mouth, and vainly stretched-out hand ;
But Kiartan followed her a step or two,
Then stayed, bewildered by his sudden woe ;
But even therewith, as nigh the door she was,
She turned back suddenly, and straight did pass,
Trembling all over, to his side, and said,
With streaming eyes :
"Let not my words be weighed
As a man's words are! O, fair love, go forth
And come thou back again, made no more worth
Unto this heart ; but worthier it may be
To the dull world thy worth that cannot see.
Go forth, and let the rumour of thee run
Through every land that is beneath the sun ;
For know I not, indeed, that everything
Thou winnest at the hands of lord or king,
Is surely mine, as thou art mine at last?"

Then round about his neck her arms she cast,
And wept right sore, and touched with love and shame,
Must Kiartan offer to leave hope of fame,
And noble life ; but midst her tears she smiled,
"Go forth, my love, and be thou not beguiled
By woman's tears, I spake but as a fool,

We of the north wrap not our men in wool,
Lest they should die at last; nay, be not moved,
To think that thou a faint-heart fool hast loved!"

For now his tears fell too, he said: "My sweet,
Ere the ship sails we yet again shall meet
To say farewell, a little while, and then,
When I come back to hold my place mid men,
With honour won for thee—how fair it is
To think on now, the sweetness and the bliss!"

Some little words she said no pen could write,
Upon his face she laid her fingers white,
And, midst of kisses, with his hair did play;
Then, smiling through her tears, she went away.
Nor heeded Bodli aught—
—Men say the twain,
Kiartan and Gudrun, never met again
In loving wise; that each to each no more
Their eyes looked kind on this side death's dark shore,
That midst their tangled life they must forget,
Till they were dead, that e'er their lips had met.

For ere the day that Kiartan meant to come
And kiss his love once more within her home,
The south-east wind, that had stayed hitherto
Their sailing, changed, and northwest now it blew;
And Kálf, the captain, urged them to set forth,
Because that tide the wind loved not the north,
And now the year grew late for long delay.
Night was it when he spake; at dawn next day,
Before the door at Herdholt might men see,
Armed, and in saddle, a goodly company.
Kiartan, bright-eyed and flushed, restless withal,
As on familiar things his eyes did fall,
Yet eager to be gone, and smiling still,
For pride and hope and love his soul did fill,
As of his coming life he thought, and saw
In all the days that were to be, no flaw.
About him were his fellows, ten such men
As in the land had got no equals then;
By him his foster-brother sat, as true
As was the steel the rover's hand erst drew;
There stood his father, flushed with joy and pride,
By the fair-carven door that did abide,
Till he fulfilled of glory came again
To take his bride before the eyes of men.

Now skipper Kálf, clad in the Peacock's gift,
Unto the south his gold-wrought spear did lift,
And Kiartan stooped and kissed his sire. A shout
Rose from the home-men, as they turned about,
And trotted jingling down the grassy knoll.
Silent awhile rode Kiartan, till his soul,
Filled with a many thoughts, in speech o'erflowed,
And unto Bodli, who beside him rode,
He fell to talk of all that they should do
In the fair countries that they journeyed to.
Not Norway only, or the western lands,
In time to come, he said, might know their hands,
But fairer places, folk of greater fame,
Where 'neath the shadow of the Roman name
Sat the Greek king, gold-clad, with bloodless sword.
But as he spoke Bodli said here a word
And there a word, and knew not what he said,
Nay, scarcely knew what wild thoughts filled his head,
What longings burned, like a still quickening flame,
Within his sad heart.
So that night they came
To Burg-firth and the place upon the strand
Where by the ready ship the tents did stand,
And there they made good cheer, and slept that night,
But on the morrow, with the earliest light,
They gat a ship-board, and, all things being done,
Upon a day when low clouds hid the sun,
And 'neath the harsh north-west down drave the rain,
They drew the gangway to the ship again,
And ran the oars out. There did Kiartan stand
By Kálf, who took the tiller in his hand
And conned the rising bows; but when at last
Toward the grey sky the wet oar-blades were cast,
And space 'twixt stern and land 'gan widen now,
Kiartan cried out and ran forth to the prow,
While rope and block yet beat confusedly,
And shook his drawn sword o'er the dark grey sea;
And step for step behind him Bodli went,
And on his sword-hilt, with a like intent,
He laid his hand, and half drew from its sheath
The rover's sword; then with a deep-drawn breath,
Most like a sigh, he thrust it back again,
His face seemed sharpened with a sudden pain.
He turned him round the driving scud to face,
His breast heaved, and he staggered in his place,
And stretched his strong arms forth with a low moan
Unto the hidden hills, 'neath which alone
Sat Gudrun—sat his love—and therewithal
Down did the bows into the black trough fall,
Up rose the oar-song, through the waters grey,
Unto the south the good ship took her way.

The Dealings of King Olaf Tryggvison with the Icelanders.

Now tells the tale that safe to Drontheim came
Kiartan with all his folk, and the great fame
Of Olaf Tryggvison then first they knew,
When thereof spake the townsmen to the crew,

But therewithal yet other news they heard,
Which seemed to one and all a heavy word;
How that the king, from the old customs turned,
Now with such zeal toward his new faith burned,
That thereby nothing else to him was good
But that all folk should bow before the Rood.
When Kiartan's coming thitherward betid
Three ships of Iceland lay there in the Nid,
Manned by stout men enow; downcast were these
Who had been glad enow the king to please;
And save their goods, and lives perchance, withal,
But knew not how their forefathers to call
Souls damned for ever and ever; yet they said
That matters drew so swiftly to a head,
That when they met the king he passed them by
With head turned round, or else with threatening eye
Scowled on them; "And when Yule-tide comes," said they,
"We look to have from him a settled day
When we must change our faith or bide the worst."

"Well," Kiartan said, "this king is not the first
To think the world is made for him alone;
Who knows how things will go ere all is done?
God wot, I wish my will done even as he;
I hate him not."
And therewith merrily
From out the ship the men of Herdholt went;
A bright eve was it, and the good town sent
Thin smoke and blue straight upward through the air,
For it had rained of late, and here and there
Sauntered the townsfolk, man and maid and child;
Where street met quay a fiddle's sound beguiled
A knot of listening folk, who no less turned
And stared hard as the westering sunbeams burned
Upon the steel and scarlet of that band,
Whom, as ye well may wot, no niggard hand
Had furnished forth; so up the long street then,
Gazing about, well gazed at, went the men,
A goodly sight. But e'en as they would wend
About the corner where that street had end,
High up in air nearby 'gan ring a chime
Whose sweetness seemed to bless e'en that sweet time
With double blessing. Kiartan stayed his folk
When first above his head that sound outbroke,
And listened smiling, till he heard a sigh
Close by him, and met Bodli's wandering eye
That fell before his.
Softly Kiartan spake:
"Now would Gudrun were here e'en for the sake
Of this sweet sound! nought have I heard so sweet."

So on they passed, and turned about the street,
And saw the great church cast its shadow down
Upon the low roofs of the goodly town,
And yet awhile they stayed their marvelling;
But therewith heard behind them armour ring,
And turning, saw a gallant company
Going afoot, and yet most brave to see,
Come toward the church, and nigher as they drew
It was to Kiartan even as if he knew
One man among them, taller by the head
Than any there, and clad in kirtle red,
Girt with a sword, with whose gold hilt he played
With his left hand, the while his right did shade
His eyes from the bright sun that 'gainst him blazed,
As on the band of Icelanders he gazed;
Broad-shouldered was he, grand to look upon,
And in his red beard tangled was the sun
That lit his bright face up in wrathful wise,
That fiercer showed his light-grey eager eyes.
Now ere he came quite close, sidelong he bent
Unto a man who close beside him went,
Then turned, and gazed at Kiartan harder yet,
As he passed by, and therewith their eyes met,
And Kiartan's heart beat, and his face grew bright,
His eyes intent as if amidst a fight,
Yet on his lips a smile was, confident,
Devoid of hate, as by him the man went.
But Bodli said, "Let us begone ere day
Is fully past, if even yet we may;
This is the king, and what then may we do
'Gainst such a man, a feeble folk and few?"

But Kiartan turned upon him loftily,
And said, "Abide! I do not look to die
Ere we get back to Iceland; one there is,
Thou knowst, therein, to hold through woe and bliss
My soul from its departing; go we then
And note the way of worship of these men."

So on that eve about the church they hung,
And through the open door heard fair things sung,
And sniffed the incense; then to ship they went.

But the next morn the king to Kiartan sent
To bid him come unto the royal hall,
Where nought but good to him and his should fall;
Close by the ship upon the sunny quay
Was Kiartan, when the man these words did say,
Amidst a ring of Icelanders, who sat
Upon the bales of unshipped goods: with that
Kiartan stood up and said unto the man:

"Undo thy kirtle if thy worn hands can!
Show us thy neck where the king's chain has galled;
But tell us not whereby thy sire was called
Lest some of these should blush—go tell the king
That I left Iceland for another thing

Than to curse all the dead men of my race,
To make him merry—lengthen not thy face,
For thou shalt tell him therewithal, that I
Will do him service well and faithfully
As a free man may do; else let him take
What he can get of me for his God's sake."

Silence there was about him at this word,
Except that Bodli muttered in his beard:
"Now certainly a good reward we have,
In that we cast away what fortune gave,
Yet doubtless shall our names be bruited far
When we are dead—then, too, no longings are
For what we may not have."
So as he came
The man went, and e'en Kiartan now had blame
For his rash word. "What will ye, friends?" he said,
"The king is wise; his wrath will well be weighed;
He knoweth that we shall not fall for nought.
Should I speak soft?—why then should we be brought,
Unarmed belike, and helpless, one by one
Up to the bishop when the feast was done—
What, Kálf! thou say'st, aboard, and let us weigh?
Yes, and be overhauled ere end of day
By the king's longships—nay, friends, all is well;
And at the worst shall be a tale to tell
Ere all is o'er."
They hearkened, and cast fear
Aside awhile; for death had need be near
Unto such men for them to heed him aught.

So the time passed, and the king harmed them nought
And sent no message more to them, and they
Were lodged within the town, and day by day
Went here and there in peace, till Yule drew nigh.
And now folk said the feast would not pass by
Without some troubling of the ancient faith
At the king's hands, and war and ugly death
Drew round the season of the peace on earth
The angels sang of at that blessed birth.
But whoso gloomed at tidings men might show,
It was not Kiartan; wary was he though,
And weighed men's speech well; and upon a day
He, casting up what this and that might say,
All Iceland folk into one place did call,
And when they were assembled in the hall,
Spake on this wise:
"Fair fellows, well ye know,
The saw that says, *the wise saves blow by blow;*
This king who lies so heavy on us here
Is a great man; his own folk hold him dear,
For he spares nought to them. Yet ye know well
That when his might on Hacon's fortune fell,
Great foes he left alive, and still they live.
Noble the man is; but yet who can give
Good fortune to his foe? and he must be,
Despite our goodwill, still our enemy.
I grudge it not, for noble seems the chance
The fortunes of a fair name to advance.
And so it may be, friends, that we shall free
The land this tide of the long tyranny
That Harald Fair-hair laid on it, and give
Unto all folks beneath just laws to live,
As in the old days—shortly let us go,
When time shall serve, and to King Olaf show
That death breeds death; I say not this same night,
But hold ye ever ready for the fight,
And shun the mead-horn: Yule is close anigh
And the king's folk will drink abundantly;
Then light the torch and draw the whetted sword!—
—A great man certes—yet I marked this word
Said by his bishop—many words he made
About a matter small if rightly weighed—
To die is gain—this king and I, and ye
Are young for that, yet so it well may be:
Some of us here are deemed to have done well;
How shall it be when folk our story tell
If we die grey-haired? honour fallen away,
Good faith lost, kindness perished—for a day
Of little pleasure mingled with great pain—
So will we not unto the Gods complain
Or draw our mouths awry with foolish hate,
This king and I, if 'neath the hand of fate
Sword to sword yet we meet: hearken once more—
It seems the master of this new-found lore
Said to his men once, *Think ye that I bring*
Peace upon earth? nay but a sword—O king,
Behold the sword ready to meet thy sword!"

Out sprang his bright steel at that latest word,
And bright the weapons glittered round about,
And the roof shook again beneath their shout;
But only Bodli, silent, pensive, stood,
As though he heeded nought of bad or good
In word or deed. But Kiartan, flushed and glad,
Noted him not, for whatso thought he had,
He deemed him ever ready in the end
To follow after as himself should wend.
Howso that was, now were these men at one,
That e'en as Kiartan bade it should be done,
And the king set on, ere on them he fell;
So then to meat they gat and feasted well;
But the next morn espial should be made
How best to do the thing that Kiartan bade.

The next morn came, and other news withal,
For by a messenger the king did call
The Icelanders to council in his house,
Bidding them note, that howso valorous

They might be, still but little doubt there was
That lightly he might bring their end to pass
If need should drive him thereto. "Yet," said he,
"Fain would I give you peace, though certainly
This tide but one of two things must ye choose,
Either nought else but life itself to lose,
Or else to come and hearken to my words
In the great hall whereas I see my lords."

Kiartan gazed round about when this was said,
Smiling beneath a frown, his face flushed red
With wrath and shame. "Well," said he, "we are caught—
The sluggards' counsel morning brings to nought.
What say ye, shall we hold the feast at home?
Hearken, the guests get ready! shall they come?"

For as he spake upon the wind was borne
Unto their ears the blast of a great horn,
And smiled the messenger, and therewithal
Down from the minster roar of bells did fall,
Rung back and clashing; thereon Bodli spake:

"Thou and I, cousin, for our honour's sake,
May be content to die; but what of these?
Thy part it is to bring us unto peace
If it may be; then, if the worst befall,
There can we die too, as in Atli's Hall
The Niblungs fell; nor worser will it sound
That thus it was, when we are underground,
And over there our Gudrun hears the tale."

Silent sat Kiartan, gazing on the pale
Set face of Bodli for a while, then turned
Unto his silent folk, and saw they yearned
For one chance more of life.
"Go, man," he said,
"And tell thy king his will shall be obeyed
So far as this, that we will come to him;
But bid him guard with steel, head, breast, and limb,
Since as we come, belike, we shall not go,
And who the end of words begun can know?
Ho, friends! do on your war-gear! Fear ye not,
Since two good things to choose from have ye got:
Peace, or a famed death!"
Then with both his ears
Ringing with clink of mail and clash of spears
The messenger went forth upon his way;
And the king knew by spies, the wise ones say,
What counsel Kiartan gave his folk that eve,
And had no will in such great hands to leave
His chance of life or death. Now, armed at last,
The men of Iceland up the long street passed,
And saw few men there; wives and children stood
Before the doors to gaze, or in his hood
An elder muttered, as they passed him by,
Or sad-eyed maids looked on them longingly.
So came they to the great hall of the king,
And round about the door there stood a ring
Of tall men armed, and each a dreaded name;
These opened to them as anigh they came,
And then again drew close, and hemmed them in,
Nor spared they speech or laughter, and the din
Was great among them, as all silently
The men of Herdholt passed the door-posts by.
Then through the hall's dusk Kiartan gazed, and saw
Small space whereby his company might draw
Nigh to the king, for there so thick men stood
That their tall spears were like a wizard's wood.
Now some way from the daïs must they stand
Where sat the king, and close to his right hand
The German bishop; but no heed at all
The king gave to our folk, as down the hall
His marshal cried for silence, and the din
Being quite appeased, in a clear voice and thin
The holy man 'gan to set forth the faith;
But for these men brought nigh the gate of Death,
Hard was it now to weigh the right and wrong
Of what he said, that seemed both dull and long.
So when at last he came unto an end,
Uprose the king, and o'er the place did send
A mighty voice: "Now have ye heard the faith,
And what the High God through his servant saith;
This is my faith: what say ye to it, then?"

Uprose a great shout from King Olaf's men,
And clash of tossing spears, and Bodli set
His hand upon his sword, while Kiartan yet
Stood still, and, smiling, eyed the king: and he
Turned on him as the din fell:
"What say ye,
What say ye, Icelanders? thou specially?
I call thee yet a year too young to die,
Son of my namesake; neither seem'st thou such
As who would trust in Odin overmuch,
Or pray long prayers to Thor, while yet thy sword
Hangs by thy side."
Now at the king's first word
Down Kiartan stooped, and 'gan his shoe to lace,
And a dumb growl went through the crowded place
Like the far thunder while the sky is bright;
But when he rose again and stood upright
The king cried out:
"Which man of these is he
Who counselled you to slay no man but me
Amid my guards?"
Kiartan stood forth a space,
And said: "E'en so, O king, thou bidd'st him face
Of his own will, the thing that all men fear,
Swift death and certain—king, the man is here,
And in his own land, Kiartan Olafson
Men called him—pity that his days are done,
For fair maids loved him."

As he said the word
From out its sheath flamed forth the rover's sword,
And Bodli was beside him, and the hall
Was filled with fury now from wall to wall,
And back to back now stood the Herdholt band,
Each with his weapon gleaming in his hand.

Then o'er the clamour was the king's voice heard;
"Peace, men of mine, too quickly are ye stirred!
Do ye not see how that this man and I
Alone of men still let our sharp swords lie
Within their sheaths? Wise is the man to know
How troublous things among great men will go.
Speak, Kiartan Olafson! I offer thee
That in my court here thou abide with me,
Keeping what faith thou wilt; but let me deal
To these thy fellows either bane or weal,
As they shall do my bidding."
"Kinglike then,"
Said Kiartan, "dost thou speak about these men;
Yea, like a fool, who knowest not the earth,
And what things thereon bring us woe or mirth;
No man there is of these but calls me friend;
Yea, and if all truth but this truth should end,
And sire, and love, and all were false to me,
Still should I look on my right hand to see
Bodli the son of Thorleik—Come, then, death,
Thy yokefellow am I."
Then from his sheath
Outsprang his sword, and even therewithal
Clear rang the Iceland shout amidst the hall,
And in a short space had the tale been o'er,
But therewith Olaf stilled the noise once more,
And smiling said:
"Thou growest angry, man!
Content thee, thou it was the strife began,
And now thou hast the best of it; come, then,
And sit beside me; thou and thy good men
Shall go in peace—only, bethink thee how
In idle poet's lies thou needst must trow—
Make no delay to take me by the hand,
Not meet it is that 'neath me thou shouldst stand."

To Kiartan's face, pale erst with death, there rose
A sudden flush, and then his lips, set close,
And knitted brow, grew soft, and in his eyes
There came at first a look of great surprise,
Then kind they grew, and with shamefaced smile
He looked upon the king a little while,
Then slowly sank his sword, and, taking it
By the sharp point, to where the king did sit
He made his way, and said:
"Nay, thou hast won;
Do thou for me what no man yet has done,
And take my sword, and leave me weaponless:
And if thy Christ is one who e'en can bless
An earthly man, or heed him aught at all,
On me too let his love and blessing fall;
But if nor Christ, nor Odin help, why, then
Still at the worst are we the sons of men,
And will we, will we not, yet must we hope,
And after unknown happiness must grope,
Since the known fails us, as the elders say;
Though sooth, for me, who know no evil day,
Are all these things but words."
"Put back thy blade,"
The king said, "thereof may I be apaid,
With thee to wield it for me; and now, come,
Deem of my land and house e'en as thine home,
For surely now I know that this thy smile
The heart from man or maid can well beguile."

As the king spake, drew Bodli nigh the place,
And a strange look withal there crossed his face;
It seemed he waited as a man in dread
What next should come; but little Kiartan said
Save thanks unto the king, and gayer now
Than men had seen him yet, he 'gan to grow.
Then gave the king command, and presently
All strife was swallowed of festivity,
And in all joyance the time slipped away,
And a fair ending crowned a troublous day.

Great love there grew 'twixt Kiartan and the king
From that time forth, and many a noble thing
Was planned betwixt them; and ere Yule was o'er
White raiment in the Minster, Kiartan bore,
And he and his were hallowed at the font.

Now so I deem it is, that use and wont,
The lords of men, the masks of many a face,
Raising the base perchance, somewhat abase
Those that are wise and noble; even so
O'er Kiartan's head as day by day did go,
Worthier the king's court, and its ways 'gan seem
Than many a thing whereof he erst did dream,
And gay he grew beyond the wont of men.
Now with the king dwelt Ingibiorg as then,
His sister; unwed was she, fair of face,
Beloved and wise, not lacking any grace
Of mind or body: Often it befell
That she and Kiartan met, and more than well
She 'gan to love him; and he let her love,
Saying withal, that nought at all might move
His heart from Gudrun; and for very sooth
He might have held that word; but yet for ruth,
And a soft pleasure that he would not name
All unrebuked he let her soft eyes claim
Kindness from his; and surely to the king
This love of theirs seemed a most happy thing,
And to himself he promised merry days,
And had in heart so Kiartan's state to raise
That he should be a king too.

But meanwhile,
Silent would Bodli go, without a smile
Upon his sad changed face from morn to eve;
And often now the thronged hall would he leave
To wander by the borders of the sea,
Waiting, half dreading, till some news should free
The band of Icelanders; most wearily
Month after month to him the days dragged by.

For ye shall know that the king looked for news
Whether the folk of Iceland would refuse,
At the priest Thangbrand's word, to change their faith.
A man of violence, the story saith,
A lecher, and a manslayer—tidings came
While yet the summer at its height did flame,
And Thangbrand brought it; little could he do,
(Although indeed two swordsmen stout he slew,)
Unto the holy faith folk's hearts to turn.
Hall of the Side, as in the tale we learn,
Gizur the White, and Hialti Skeggison,
With some few others, to the faith were won,
The most of men little these things would heed,
And some were furious heathens; so, indeed,
To save his life he had to flee away.
Wroth was the king hereat, and now would stay
The Iceland ships from sailing; little fain
Was Kiartan yet to get him back again,
Since he, forgetting not the former days—
It might be—passed his life fulfilled of praise,
And love, and glory. So the time went on,
Gizur the White and Hialti Skeggison,
Fleeing from Iceland, in the autumn-tide
Came out to Norway with the king to bide
Until the summer came, when they should go
Once more the truth of Christ's fair lore to show.
Long ago now of Gudrun and her ways,
And of the coming of those happy days
That were to be, had Kiartan ceased to speak
Unto his friend; who sullen now and weak,
Weary with waiting, faint with holding back
He scarcely knew from what, did surely lack
Some change of days if yet he was to live.
Tidings the new comers to him did give
From Laxdale, speaking lightly of the thing
That like a red-hot iron hand did wring
His weary heart; Gudrun was fair and well,
And still at Bathstead in good hope did dwell
Of Kiartan's swift return. That word or two,
That name, wrought in him, that at last he knew
His longing, and intent; and desolate
The passing of the days did he await,
Torn by remorse, tortured by fear, lest yet
Kiartan the lapse of strange days should forget,
And take to heart the old familiar days,
And once more turn him to the bygone ways
Where they were happy—but his fear was vain,
For if his friend of Iceland had been fain
Scarce had he gone; the king would keep him there
A pledge with other three, till he should hear
What thing the Icelanders this time would do,
Nor, as we said, had he good will to go
Whatso his power was: for suchwise things went
With Ingibiorg, that folk with one consent
Named her his bride that was to be, and said,
That sure a nobler pair were never wed.

And so the time passed, till the day came round
When at the quay the ships lay Iceland-bound,
And Bodli went to bid his friend farewell,
Flushed and bright-eyed, for wild hope, sooth to tell,
Had striven with shame, and cast its light on love,
Until a fairer sky there seemed above,
A fairer earth about, and still most fair
The fresh green sea that was to bring him there,
Whereon his heart was set.
"O gay! O gay!"
Said Kiartan, "thou art glad to go away;
This is the best face I have seen on thee
Since first our black oars smote the Burgfirth sea."

But as he spake a dark flush and a frown
Swallowed up Bodli's smile; he cast adown
His eager eyes: "Thou art as glad to stay,
Belike," he said, "as I to go away.
What thinkest thou I plot against thee then?"

"Thou art the strangest of the sons of men,"
Said Kiartan, with a puzzled look. "Come now,
Leave off thy riddles, clear thy troubled brow,
And let me think of thee as in time past,
When ever a most merry lad thou wast!
Why talkest thou of plotting? True and leal
I deem thee ever as the well-tried steel
That hangs beside thee; neither cross at all
Our fond desires. Though whatso thing may fall
Still shall I trust thee."
His own face grew grave
As o'er his heart there swept a sudden wave
Of the old thoughts. But Bodli said, "O friend,
Forgive my face fair looks and foul; I wend
Back to our kin and land, that gladdens me.
I leave thee here behind across the sea,
That makes me sad and sour."
He did not raise
His eyes up midst his words, or meet the gaze
Kiartan bent on him, till again he said:
"Olaf shall hear of all the goodlihead
Thou gainest here. Thy brethren shall be glad
That thou such honour from all men hast had.
Oswif the Wise no doubt I soon shall see—
What shall I say to him?"

Then steadily
Gazed Kiartan on him. "Tell Gudrun all this
Thou knowest of, my honour and my bliss;
Say we shall meet again!"
No more they spake,
But kissed and parted; either's heart did ache
A little while with thought of the old days;
Then Bodli to the future turned his gaze,
Unhappy and remorseful, knowing well
How ill his life should go whate'er befell.
But Kiartan, left behind, being such a man
As through all turns of fortune never can
Hold truce with fear or sorrow, lived his life
Not ill content with all the change and strife.

Fair goes the ship that beareth out Christ's truth,
Mingled of hope, of sorrow, and of ruth,
And on the prow Bodli the Christian stands,
Sunk deep in thought of all the many lands
The world holds, and the folk that dwell therein,
And wondering why that grief and rage and sin
Was ever wrought; but wondering most of all
Why such wild passion on his heart should fall.

Bodli brings Tidings to Bathstead.

Now so it chanced, on a late summer day,
Unto the west would Oswif take his way
With all his sons, and Gudrun listlessly
Stood by the door their going forth to see,
Until the hill's brow hid them; then she turned,
And long she gazed, the while her full heart yearned
Toward Herdholt and the south.
"Late grows the year,"
She said, "and winter cometh with its fear
And dreams of dying hopes. Ah me, I change,
And my heart hardens! Will he think me strange
When he beholds this face of mine at last,
Or shall our love make nought of long days past,
Burn up the sights that we apart have seen,
And make them all as though they had not been?
Ah, the hard world! I, who in hope so sure
Have waited, scarcely may the days endure.
How has it been with those who needs must wait
With dying hope and lingering love, till hate,
The seed of ill lies, told and hearkened to,
The knot of loving memories shall undo,
Break the last bonds of love, and cast them forth
With nothing left to them of joy or worth?
"O love, come back, come back, delay no more
To ease thine aching heart that yearneth sore
For me, as mine for thee! Leave wealth and praise
For those to win who know no happy days.
Come, though so true thou art, thou fearest not
Yet to delay! Come, my heart waxes hot
For all thy lonely days to comfort thee."

So spake she, and awhile stood quietly,
Still looking toward the south, her wide grey eyes
Made tenderer with those thronging memories,
Until upon the wind she seemed to hear
The sound of horse-hoofs, and 'twixt hope and fear
She trembled, as more clear the far sounds grew,
And thitherward it seemed from Herdholt drew;
So now at last to meet that sound she went,
Until her eyes, on the hill's brow intent,
Beheld a spear rising against the sky
O'er the grey road, and therewith presently
A gilded helm rose up beneath the spear,
And then her trembling limbs no more might bear
Her body forward; scarce alive she stood,
And saw a man in raiment red as blood
Rise o'er the hill's brow, who when he did gain
The highest part of the grey road, drew rein
To gaze on Bathstead spreading 'neath him there,
Its bright vanes glittering in the morning air.
She stared upon him panting, and belike
He saw her now, for he his spurs did strike
Into his horse, and, while her quivering face
Grew hard and stern, rode swiftly to the place
Whereas she stood, and clattering leapt adown
Unto the earth, and met her troubled frown
And pale face, with the sad imploring eyes
Of Bodli Thorleikson.
Then did there rise
A dreadful fear within her heart, for she
No look like that in him was wont to see;
Scarce had she strength to say:
"How goes it then,
With him—thy kinsman, mid the Eastland men?"

Then, writhen as with some great sudden sting
Of pain, he spake; "Fear not, Gudrun, I bring
Fair news of his well-doing—he is well."

"Speak out," she said, "what more there is to tell!
Is he at Herdholt? will he come to-day?"

And with that word she turned her face away,
Shamed with the bitter-sweet of yearning pain,
And to her lips the red blood came again;
But he a moment made as he would reach
His hand to hers, his sad eyes did beseech
Some look from hers, so blind to him, so blind!
And scarce his story might he call to mind,
Until he deemed he saw her shoulders heave
As with a sob.
Then said he, "We did leave
Kiartan in Norway, praised of all men there;
He bade me tell thee that his life was fair

And full of hope—and that he looked to see
Thy face again.—So God be good to me,
These were the words he spake!"
For now she turned
Tearless upon him, and great anger burned
Within her eyes: "O trusty messenger,
No doubt through thee his very voice I hear!
Sure but light thought and stammering voice he had
To waste on one, who used to make him glad!
Thou art a true friend! Ah, I know thee, then,
A follower on the footsteps of great men,
To reap where they have sowed. Alive and well!
And doing deeds whereof the skalds shall tell!
Ah, what fair days he heapeth up for me!
Come now, unless thine envy stayeth thee,
Speak more of him, and make me glad at heart!"

Then Bodli said, "Nay, I have done my part,
Let others tell the rest"—and turned to go,
Yet lingered, and she cried aloud:
"No, no,
Friend of my lover! if ill words I spake
Yet pardon me! for sore my heart doth ache
With pent-up love."
She reached her hand to him,
He turned and took it, and his eyes did swim
With tears for him and her; a while it seemed,
As though the dream so many a sweet night dreamed,
Waked from with anguish on so many a morn,
Were come to pass, that he afresh was born
To happy life, with heavens and earth made new;
But slowly from his grasp her hand she drew,
And stepped aback, and said:
"Speak, I fear not,
Because so true a heart my love hath got
That nought can change it; speak, when cometh he?
Tell me the sweet words that he spake of me.
Did he not tell me in the days agone,
That oft he spake of me to thee alone?
Nay, tell me of his doings, for indeed
Of words 'twixt him and me is little need."

Then Bodli 'gan in troubled voice to tell
True tidings of the things that there befell,
Saving of Ingibiorg, and Gudrun stood
And hearkened, trembling:
"Good, yea, very good,"
She said, when he had done, "and yet I deem
All this thou say'st as if we dreamed a dream;
Nor cam'st thou here to say but this to me—
Why tarrieth Kiartan yet beyond the sea?"

Bodli flushed red, and, trembling sorely, spake
"O Gudrun, must thou die for one man's sake,
So heavenly as thou art? What shall I say?
Thou mayst live long, yet never see the day
That bringeth Kiartan back unto this land."

He looked at her, but moveless did she stand,
Nor spake a word, nor yet did any pain
Writhe her fair face, grown deadly pale again.
Then Bodli stretched his hand forth;
"Yet they lie,
Who say I did the thing, who say that I,
E'en in my inmost heart, have wished for it.
But thou—O, hearken, Gudrun—he doth sit
By Ingibiorg's side ever; day by day,
Sadder his eyes grow when she goes away—
What! know I not the eyes of lovers then?—
Why should I tell thee of the talk of men,
Babbling of how he weds her, is made king,
How he and Olaf shall have might to bring
Denmark and England both beneath their rule.
—Ah, woe, woe, woe, that I, a bitter fool,
Upon one heart all happy life should stake;
Woe is me, Godrun, for thy beauty's sake!
Ah, for my fool's eyes and my greedy heart
Must all rest henceforth from my soul depart?"

He reached his hand to her, she put it by,
And gathered up her gown-skirts hurriedly,
And in a voice, like a low wailing wind,
Unto the wind she cried:
"Still may he find
A woman worthy of his loveliness;
Still may it be that she his days will bless,
As I had done, had we been wed at last!"

Therewith by Bodli's trembling hands she passed,
Nor gave one look on him; but he gazed still,
E'en when her gown fluttered far down the hill,
With staring eyes upon the empty place
Where last he saw the horror of her face
Changed by consuming anguish; when he turned,
Blind with the fire that in his worn heart burned,
Empty the hill-side was of anyone,
And as a man who some great crime hath done
He gat into his saddle, and scarce knew
Whither he went, until his rein he drew
By Herdholt porch, as in the other days,
When Kiartan by his side his love would praise.

Three days at Herdholt in most black despair
Did Bodli sit, till folk 'gan whisper there
That the faith-changer on the earth was dead,
Although he seemed to live; with mighty dread
They watched his going out and coming in;
On the fourth day somewhat did hope begin
To deal, as its wont is, with agony;
And he, who truly at the first could see
What dreadful things his coming days did wait,
Now, blinded by the hand of mocking fate,

Deeming that good from evil yet might rise,
Once more to pleasure lifted up his eyes.
And now, to nurse his hope, there came that day
A messenger from Gudrun, who did pray
That he would straightly come and see her there.
At whose mazed face a long while did he stare
As one who heard not, and the man must speak
His message thrice, before a smile 'gan break
Over his wan face; neither did he say
A word in answer, but straight took his way
O'er rough and smooth to Bathstead, knowing not
What ground his horse beneath his hoofs had got.

Ah, did he look for pleasure, when he saw
Her long slim figure down the dusk hall draw
Unto his beating heart, as nobly clad
As in the days when all the three were glad?
Did he perchance deem that he might forget
The man across the sea? His eyes were wet
For pity of that heart so made forlorn,
But on his lips a smile, of pleasure born,
Played, that I deem perchance he knew not of,
As he reached out his hand to touch his love
Long ere she drew anigh. But now, when she
Was close to him, and therewith eagerly,
Trembling and wild-eyed, he beheld the face
He deemed e'en then would gladden all the place,
Blank grew his heart, and all hope failed in him,
And e'en the anguish of his love grew dim,
And poor it seemed, a thing of little price,
Before the gathered sorrow of her eyes.

But while, still trembling there, the poor wretch stood,
She spoke in a low voice that chilled his blood,
So worn and far away it seemed; "See now,
I sent for thee, who of all men dost know
The heart of him who once swore troth to me:
Kiartan, I mean, the son of Olaf, he
Who o'er the sea wins great fame as thou say'st—
That thou mayst tell again, why he doth waste
The tale of happy days that we shall have;
For death comes quickly on us, and the grave
Is a dim land whereof I know not aught."

As a grey dove, within the meshes caught,
Flutters a little, then lies still again
Ere wildly beat its wings with its last pain,
So once or twice her passion, as she spake,
Rose to her throat, and yet might not outbreak
Till that last word was spoken; then as stung
By pain on pain, her arms abroad she flung,
And wailed aloud; but dry-eyed Bodli stood
Pale as a corpse, and in such haggard mood,
Such helpless, hopeless misery, as one
Who first in hell meets her he hath undone.
Yet sank her wailing in a little while,
Through dreadful sobs to silence, and a smile,
A feeble memory of the courteous ways,
For which in days agone she won such praise,
Rose to her pale lips, and she spake once more
As if the passionate words, cast forth before,
Were clean forgotten, with that bitter wail:

"O, Bodli Thorleikson, of good avail
Thou ever art to me, and now hast come
Swiftly indeed unto a troubled home:
For ill at ease I am, and fain would hear
From thee who knowst him, why this looked-for year
Lacks Kiartan still."
He knew not what to say,
But she reached out her hand in the old way
And coldly palm met palm: then him she led
Unto a seat, and sat by him, and said:

"Yea, fain am I to hear the tale once more,
The shame and grief, although it hurt me sore;
Yea, from thee, Bodli; though it well may be
That he I trusted, too much trusted thee."

So great a burden on his spirit lay
He heeded not the last words she did say,
But in low measured speech began again
The story of the honour and the gain
That Kiartan had, and how his days went now;
She sat beside him, with her head bent low,
Hearkening, or hearkening not; but now when all
Was done, and he sat staring at the wall
Silent, and full of misery, then she said:

"How know I yet but thou the tale hast made,
Since many a moment do I think of now
In the old time before ye went, when thou
Wouldst look on me, as on him I should gaze
If he were here, false to the happy days?"

"A small thing," said he, "shall I strive with fate
In vain, or vainly pray against thy hate?
Would God I were a liar! that his keel
E'en now the sands of White-river did feel.
O Gudrun, Gudrun, thou shalt find it true!
Ah, God, what thing is left for me to do?"

Therewith he rose, and towards the hall-door went,
Nor heard her voice behind him, as she bent
O'er the tear-wetted rushes of the floor.
Sick-hearted was he when he passed the door,
Weary of all things, weary of his love,
And muttering to himself hard things thereof;
But when he reached the Herdholt porch again,
A heaven long left seemed that morn's bitter pain,

And one desire alone he had, that he
Once more anigh unto his love might be;
Honour and shame, truth, lies, and weal and woe,
Seemed idle words whose meaning none might know;
What was the world to him with all its ways,
If he once more into her eyes might gaze?
Again he saw her, not alone this tide,
But in the hall, her father by her side,
And many folk around: if like a dream
All things except her loveliness did seem,
Yet doubt ye not that evil shades they were;
A dream most horrible for him to bear,
That all his strength was fallen to weakness now,
That he the sweet repose might never know
Of being with her from all the world apart,
Eyes watching eyes, heart beating unto heart.
Cold was her face, not pensive as before,
And like a very queen herself she bore
Among the guests, and courteous was to all,
But no kind look on Bodli's face did fall,
Though he had died to gain it.
So time wore,
And still he went to Bathstead more and more,
And whiles alone, and whiles in company,
With raging heart her sad face did he see,
And still the time he spent in hall and bower
Beside her did he call the evillest hour
Of all the day, the while it dured! but when
He was away, came hope's ghost back again
And fanned his miserable longing, till
He said within himself that nought was ill
Save that most hideous load of loneliness.
Howso the time went, never rest did bless
His heart a moment; nought seemed good to him,
Not e'en the rest of death, unknown and dim.

And Kiartan came not, and what news came out
From Norway was a gravestone on such doubt
As yet might linger in the hearts of men,
That he perchance might see that land again.
And no more now spake Gudrun any word
Of Kiartan, until folk with one accord
Began to say, how that no little thing
It was, those two great strains of men to bring
Into alliance: "Pity though!" they said,
"That she to such a strange man should be wed
As Bodli Thorleikson of late hath grown!"

So sprung the evil crop by evil sown.

Kiartan's Farewell to Norway.

Meanwhile to Kiartan far across the sea,
Unto all seeming, life went merrily;
Yet none the less the lapse of days would bring
Unto his frank heart something of a sting,
And Bodli's sad departing face and word,
Not wholly thrust out from his memory, stirred
Doubts of the changing days in Kiartan's mind,
And scarce amid his joyance might he find
The happy days he ever looked to have,
Till he were lying silent in his grave.
And somewhat more distraught now would he take
The gentle words that the king's sister spake,
And look into her eyes less fervently,
And less forget the world when she drew nigh,
And start and look around as her soft hand
Fell upon his, as though a ghost did stand
Anigh him, and he feared to hear it speak.
And Ingibiorg for her part, grown too weak
Against the love she had for him to strive,
Yet knew no less whither the days did drive
Her wasted life; and, seeing him as oft
As she might do, and speaking sweet and soft,
When they twain were together: smiling, too,
Though fast away the lovesome time did go,
Wept long through lonely hours, nor cast away
From out her heart thought of the coming day,
When all should be as it had never been,
And the wild sea should roll its waves between
His grey eyes and her weary useless tears.

But while she brooded o'er the coming years
Empty of love, and snatched what joy there was
Yet left to her, great tidings came to pass;
For late the summer after Bodli sailed,
News came, that now at last had Christ prevailed
In Iceland; that the Hill of Laws had heard
Sung through the clear air many a threatening word,
And seen the weapons gather for the fight;
Till Snorri's wiles, Hall's wisdom, Gizur's might,
And fears of many men, and wavering doubt
On the worse side, had brought it so about
That now Christ's faith was law to everyone:
The learned say, a thousand years agone
Since the cold shepherds in the winter night
Beheld and heard the angels' fresh delight.
King Olaf's heart swelled at such news as these,
Straightway he sent for the four hostages,
And bade them with good gifts to go their ways
If so they would; or stay and gather praise
And plenteous honour there; and as he spake
He glanced at Kiartan, and a smile did bread
Across his kingly face, as who would say,
"Thou at the least wilt scarcely go away."
But Kiartan answered not the smile, but stood
Grave with deep thought, and troubled in his mood
Until he saw his fellows looked that he
Should speak for all; then said he presently:

"Thanks have thou, King, for all that thou hast done
To us, and the great honour I have won
At thine hands here; yet be not angry, King,
If still we thank thee most for this one thing,
That here thou stay'st us not against our will;
Thicker is blood than water, say I still;
This is the third year since I left my kin
And land—and other things that dwell therein."

The king's face fell, and in sharp words and few
He answered: "Well, a gift I gave to you;
And will not take it back—Go, Kiartan, then,
And, if thou canst, find kinder, truer men,
And lovelier maids in thy land than in this!

But Kiartan said, "King, take it not amiss!
Thou knowest I have ever said to thee,
That I must one day go across the sea;
Belike I shall come back upon a tide,
And show thee such a wonder of a bride
As earth holds not, nay nor the heavens, I deem."

"God send thee a good ending to thy dream;
Yet my heart cries that if thou goest from me,
Thy pleasant face I never more shall see;
Be merry then, while fate will have it so!"

So therewith unto high feast did they go,
And by the king sat Kiartan, and the day
'Twixt merry words and sad thoughts wore away.

Now were the ships got ready, and the wares
Drawn for long months past from the upland fairs
Were laid ashipboard. Kálf was skipper still
Of Kiartan's ship, for never had he will
To leave his side. Now restless Kiartan was,
And longed full sore for these last days to pass,
For in his heart there lurked a spark of fear,
Nor any word of Gudrun might he hear
From those who brought the news of change of faith,
Since nigh the Fleet they dwelt, my story saith,
In the south country, and knew nought at all
Of what in Laxdale late had chanced to fall.

Now by their bridges lay the laden ships,
And he now at the last must see the lips
Of Ingibiorg grow pale with their farewell;
And sick at heart he grew, for, sooth to tell,
He feared her sorrow much, and furthermore
He loved her with a strange love very sore,
Despite the past and future. So he went
Sad-eyed amid the hall's loud merriment
Unto her bower on that last morn of all.
Alone she was, her head against the wall
Had fallen; her heavy eyes were shut when he
Stood on the threshold; she rose quietly,
Hearing the clash of arms, and took his hand,
And thus with quivering lips awhile did stand
Regarding him: but he made little show
Of manliness, but let the hot tears flow
Fast o'er his cheeks. At last she spake:
"Weep then!
If thou who art the kindest of all men
Must sorrow for me, yet more glad were I
To see thee leave my bower joyfully
This last time; that when o'er thee sorrow came,
And thought of me therewith, thou mightst not blame
My little love for ever saddening thee.
Love!—let me say love once—great shalt thou be,
Beloved of all, and dying ne'er forgot.
Farewell! farewell! farewell! and think thou not
That in my heart there lingers any hate
Of her who through these years for thee did wait,
A weary waiting—three long, long, long years,
Well over now; nay when of me she hears,
Fain were I she should hate me not. Behold,
Here is a coif, well wrought of silk and gold
By folk of Micklegarth, who had no thought
Of thee or me, and thence by merchants brought
Who perchance loved not. Is Gudrun too fair
To take this thing, a queen might long to wear?
Upon the day when on the bench ye sit,
Hand held in hand, crown her fair head with it,
And tell her whence thou hadst it. Ah, farewell,
Lest of mine eyes thou shouldst have worse to tell
Than now thou hast!"
Therewith she turned from him
And took the coif, wherein the gold was dim
With changing silken threads, the linen white
Scarce seen amid the silk and gold delight.
With hands that trembled little did she fold
The precious thing, and set its weight of gold
Within a silken bag; and then to his
She reached her hands, and in one bitter kiss
Tasted his tears, while a great wave of thought
Of what sweet things the changed years might have brought
Swept over her—and then she knew him gone,
And yet for all that scarcely felt more lone
Than for a many days past she had felt.
So with fixed eyes she drew into her belt
Her kirtle, and to this and that thing turned
With heart that ever for the long rest yearned.

Bearing that gift, but heeding not what thing
He had with him, came Kiartan to the king,
Who in the porch abode him, his great men
Standing around; then said he:
"Welcome then
This last day that I see thee; go we forth,
Fair lords, and see his ship's head greet the north,

For seldom from the north shall any come
Like unto him to greet us in our home."

So forth they went, and all the Iceland men
Gat them aboard, and skipper Kálf by then
Stood midway on the last bridge, while the king
'Gan say to Kiartan:
"Many a treasured thing
Had I laid down, O friend, to keep thee here,
But since the old thing still must be more dear
Than the new thing, to such men as thou art,
Now, with my goodwill, to thy love depart,
And leave me here the coming woes to meet
Without thee. May thy life be fair and sweet,
Nor yet drag on till present days are nought,
And all the past days a tormenting thought!
Take this last gift of me; a noble sword,
Which if thou dost according to my word,
Shall never leave thy side; for who can know
Ere all is o'er, how madly things may go?"

So Kiartan took the sword, and thanked the king,
With no light heart, for that and everything
That at his hands he had, and therewith crossed
The gangway; shoreward were the hawsers tossed,
The long sweeps smote the water, and the crew
Shouted their last farewell; the white sail drew,
'Twixt Norway and the stern, swept in the sea.

There stood the king, and long time earnestly
Looked on the lessening ship; then said at last,
As o'er his knitted brow his hand he passed:
"Go thy ways, Kiartan; great thou art indeed,
And great thy kin are, nathless shalt thou need
Stout heart enough to meet what waiteth thee
If aught mine eyes of things to come may see."

Kiartan back in Iceland; Refna comes into the Tale.

Kiartan and Kálf in Burgfirth came aland
And raised their tents anigh unto the strand,
As in the summer-tide the fashion was
Of mariners, the while the news did pass
That they were come out, through the country-side,
And there awhile that summer would abide.
Now when to Herdholt did that tidings come,
Olaf and all his sons were gone from home:
So Kiartan saw them not at first, among
The folk that to the newcomers did throng;
Amidst the first of whom, he, none the less,
Noted his friend Gudmund of Asbiornsness,
Who to his sister Thurid now was wed,
And brought her with him; with all goodlihead
He greeted them, yet Kiartan deemed that they
Looked on him strangely; on the self-same day
Kálf's father, Asgeir, came, and brought with him
Refna, his daughter, fair of face and limb,
Dark-haired, great-eyed, and gentle: timidly
She gazed at Kiartan as he drew anigh
And gave her welcome.
Now as he began
To ask them news of this and that good man,
And how he fared, Thurid with anxious face
Came up to him, and drew him from the place,
Saying, "Come, talk with me apart awhile!"
He followed after with a puzzled smile,
Yet his heart felt as something ill drew near.
So, when they came where none their speech might hear,
Thurid turned round about on him, and said,
"Brother, amidst thy speech, I shook with dread
Lest Gudrun's name from out thy lips should burst;
How was it then thou spak'st not of her first?"

Then Kiartan, trembling, said, "Indeed, I thought
That news of ill unasked would soon be brought—
Sister, what ails thee then—is my love dead?"

"Nay," Thurid stammered, "she is well—and wed."

"What!" cried out Kiartan, "and the Peacock's house?
I used to deem my brothers valorous,
My father a great man—and Bodli's sword,
Where was it midst this shame?"
Scarce was the word
Out of his lips, ere, looking on her face,
He turned and staggered wildly from the place,
Crying aloud, "O blind, O blind, O blind!
Where is the world I used to deem so kind,
So loving to me? O Gudrun, Gudrun,
Here I come back with all the honour won
We talked of, that thou saidst thou knewest well
Was but for thee—to whom then shall I tell
The tale of that well-doing? And thou, friend,
How might I deem that aught but death should end
Our love together? yea, and even now,
How shall I learn to hate thee, friend, though thou
Art changed into a shadow and a lie?
O ill day of my birth, ill earth and sky,
Why was I then bemocked with days of bliss
If still the ending of them must be this?
O wretch, that once wast happy, days a-gone,
Before thou wert so wretched and alone,
How on unhappy faces wouldst thou look
And scarce with scorn and ruth their sorrow brook!
Now then at last thou knowest of the earth,
And why the elders look askance on mirth."

Some paces had he gone from where she stood,
Gazing in terror on his hapless mood,
And now she called his name; he turned about,
And far away he heard the shipmen's shout
And beat of the sea, and from the down there came
The bleat of ewes; and all these, and his name,
And the sights too, the green down 'neath the sun,
The white strand and the far-of hill-sides dun,
And white birds wheeling, well-known things did seem,
But pictures now or figures in a dream,
With all their meaning lost. Yet therewithal
On his vexed spirit did the new thought fall
How weak and helpless and alone he was.
Then gently to his sister did he pass,
And spake:

"Now is the world clean changed for me
In this last minute, yet indeed I see
That still will it go on for all my pain;
Come then, my sister, let us back again;
I must meet folk, and face the life beyond,
And, as I may, walk 'neath the dreadful bond
Of ugly pain—such men our fathers were,
Not lightly bowed by any weight of care."

She smiled upon him kindly, and they went
And found folk gathered in the biggest tent,
And busied o'er the wares, and gay enow
In outward seeming; though ye well may know
Folk dreaded much for all the country's sake
In what wise Kiartan this ill news would take.
Now Kálf had brought the gayest things to show
The women-folk, and by a bale knelt now
That Kiartan knew right well, and close by him
Sat Refna, with her dainty hand and slim
Laid on a broidered bag, her fair head crowned
With that rich coif thereafter so renowned
In Northland story. As he entered there
She raised to him her deep grey eyes, and fair
Half-opened mouth, and blushed blood-red therewith;
And inwardly indeed did Kiartan writhe
With bitter anguish as his eyes did meet
Her bright-flushed gentle face so pure and sweet;
And he thenceforth to have no lot or part
In such fair things; yet struggling with his heart
He smiled upon her kindly. Pale she grew
When the flush passed, as though in sooth she knew
What sickness ailed him.

"Be not wroth," she said,
"That I have got this queen's gift on my head,
I bade them do it not."

Then wearily
He answered: "Surely it beseemeth thee
Right well, and they who set it there did right.
Rich were the man who owned the maiden bright,
And the bright coif together!"

As he spake
Wandered his eyes; so sore his heart did ache
That not for long those matters might he note;
Yet a glad flush again dyed face and throat
Of Refna, and she said, "So great and famed,
So fair and kind! where shall the maid be named
To say no to thine asking?"

Once again
All pale she grew, for stung by sudden pain
Kiartan turned round upon the shrinking maid,
And, laughing wildly, with a scowl he said:
"All women are alike to me—all good—
All blessings on this fair earth by the rood!"

Then silence fell on all, yet he began
Within a while to talk to maid and man
Mildly as he was wont, and through the days
That they abode together in that place
Seemed little changed; and so his father thought
When he to him at last his greeting brought,
And bade him home to Herdholt. So they rode
Talking of many things, to his abode,
Nor naming Gudrun aught. Thus Kiartan came
Back to his father's house, grown great of fame,
And tidingless a while day passed by day
What hearts soe'er 'neath sorrow's millstone lay.

Tidings brought to Bathstead of Kiartan's coming back.

Yes, there the hills stood, there Lax-river ran
Down to the sea; still thrall and serving-man
Came home from fold and hayfield to the hall,
And still did Olaf's cheery deep voice call
Over the mead horns; danced the fiddle-bow,
And twanged the harp-strings, and still sweet enow
Were measured words, as someone skilled in song
Told olden tales of war, and love, and wrong.
—And Bodli's face from hall and board was gone,
And Gudrun's arms were round him, as alone
They lay, all unrebuked that hour, unless
The dawn, that glimmered on the wretchedness
Of Kiartan's lone and sleepless night, should creep
Cold-footed o'er their well-contented sleep,
And whisper, "Sleep on, lapse of time is here
Death's brother, and the very Death is near!"

Such thoughts might haunt the poor deserted man,
When through the sky dawn's hopeless shiver ran,
And bitterness grew in him, as the day,
Cleared of fantastic half-dreams, cold and grey,
Was bared before him. Yet I deem, indeed,
That they no less of pity had good need.
Yea, had his eyes beheld that past high-tide
At Bathstead, where sat Gudrun as a bride
By Bodli Thorleikson! Her face of yore,

So swift to change, as changing thoughts passed o'er
Her eager heart, set now into a smile
That scarce the fools of mankind might beguile
To deeming her as happy: his, once calm
With dreamy happiness, that would embalm
Into sweet memory things of yesterday,
And show him pictures of things far away,
Now drawn, and fierce, and anxious, still prepared
It seemed, to meet the worst his worn heart feared.
A dismal wedding! every ear at strain
Some sign of things that were to be to gain;
A guard on every tongue lest some old name
Should set the poisoned smouldering pile aflame.
Silent the fierce dull sons of Oswif drank,
And Olaf back into his high seat shrank,
And seemed aged wearily, the while his sons
Glanced doubtfully at Bodli; more than once
Did one of them begin some word to speak,
And catch his father's eye, and then must break
His speech off with a smile not good or kind;
And in meanwhile the wise would fain be blind
To all these things, or cover boisterously
The seeds of ill they could not fail to see.

But if 'neath all folk's eyes things went e'en so,
How would it be then with the hapless two
The morrow of that feast? This know I well
That upon Bodli the last gate of hell
Seemed shut at last, and no more like a star
Far off perchance, yet bright however far,
Shone hope of better days; yet he lived on,
And soon indeed, the worst of all being won,
And gleams of frantic pleasure therewithal,
A certain quiet on his soul did fall,
As though he saw the end and waited it.
But over Gudrun changes wild would flit,
And sometimes stony would she seem to be;
And sometimes would she give short ecstasy
To Bodli with a fit of seeming love;
And sometimes, as repenting sore thereof,
Silent the live-long day would sit and stare,
As though she knew some ghost were drawing near,
And ere it came with all the world must break,
That she might lose no word it chanced to speak.

So slowly led the changed and weary days
Unto the gateway of the silent place,
Where either rest or utter change shall be;
But on an eve, when summer peacefully
Yielded to autumn, as men sat in hall
Two wandering churles old Oswif forth did call
Into the porch, and asked for shelter there.
And since unheeded none might make such prayer,
Soon 'mid the boisterous house-carles were they set,
The ugly turns of fortune to forget
In mirth and ease, and still with coarse rude jest
They pleased the folk, and laughed out with the best.
But while the lower hall of mirth was full
More than their wont the great folk there were dull;
Oswif was sunk in thought of other days,
And Gudrun's tongue idly some tale did praise
Her brother Ospak told, the while her heart
Midst vain recurring hopes was set apart;
And Bodli looked as though he still did bide
The coming fate it skilled no more to hide
From his sore wearied heart: no more there were
Upon the daïs that eve; but when the cheer
Was over now, old Oswif went his ways,
But Ospak sat awhile within his place
Staring at Bodli with a look of scorn;
For much he grew to hate that face forlorn,
Bowed down with cares he might not understand.

At last midst Gudrun's talk, with either hand
Stretched out did Ospak yawn, and cried aloud
Unto the lower table's merry crowd:
"Well fare ye, fellows! ye are glad to-night;
What thing is it that brings you such delight?
We be not merry here."
Then one stepped forth,
And said: "Sooth, Ospak, but of little worth
Our talk was; yet these wandering churles are full
Of meat and drink, and need no rope to pull
Wild words and gleesome from them."
"Bring them here,"
Said Ospak, "they may mend our doleful cheer."

So from the lower end they came, ill clad,
Houseless, unwashen, yet with faces glad,
If for a while; yet somewhat timorous, too,
With such great men as these to have to do,
Although to fear was drink a noble shield.

"Well, fellows, what fair tidings are afield?"
Said Ospak, "and whence come ye?"
The first man
Turned leering eyes on Bodli's visage wan,
And o'er his face there spread a cunning grin.
But just as he his first word would begin,
The other, drunker, and a thought more wise
Maybe for that, said, screwing up his eyes,
"Say-all-you-know shall go with clouted head.'

"Say-nought-at-all is beaten," Ospak said,
"If, with his belly full of great men's meat,
He has no care to make his speeches sweet."

"Be not wroth, son of Oswif," said the first;
"Now I am full I care not for the worst
That haps to-night; yet Mistress Gudrun there"——

"Tush!" said the second, "thou art full of care
For a man full of drink. Come, let her say
That as we came so shall we go away,
And all is soon told."

Ospak laughed thereat,
As sprawling o'er the laden board he sat,
His cheek close to his cup; but Gudrun turned
Unto him, pale, although her vexed heart burned
With fresh desire, and a great agony
Of hope strove in her.
"Tell thy tale to me
And have a gift therefor," she said: "behold!
My finger is no better for this gold!
Draw it off swiftly!"
Then she reached her hand
Out to the man, who wondering there did stand
Beholding it, half sobered by her face;
Nor durst he touch the ring.
"Unto this place
From Burgfirth did we come," he said, "and there,
Around a new-beached ship folk held a fair—
Kálf Asgeirson, men said, the skipper was—
But others to and fro did I see pass."

Still Ospak chuckled, lolling o'er his drink,
Nor any whit hereat did Gudrun shrink,
But Bodli rose up, and the hall 'gan pace,
As on the last time when in that same place
Kiartan and he and she together were;
And on this day of anguish and of fear,
Well-nigh his weary heart began to deem
That that past day did but begin a dream
From which he needs must wake up presently,
Those lovers in each other's arms to see,
To feel himself heart-whole and innocent;
"Yea, yea, a many people came and went
About the ship," he heard the first guest say;
"Gudmund and Thurid did I see that day,
And Asgeir and his daughter, and they stood
About a man, whose kirtle, red as blood,
Was fine as a king's raiment."
Ospak here
Put up his left hand slowly to his ear,
As one who hearkens, smiling therewithal,
And now there fell a silence on the hall,
As the man said:
"I had not seen before
This fair tall man, who in his sword-belt bore
A wondrous weapon, gemmed, and wrought with gold;
Too mean a man I was to be so bold
As in that place to ask about his name.
—Yet certes, mistress, to my mind it came,
That, if tales lied not, this was even he
Men said should wed a bride across the sea
And be a king—e'en Kiartan Olafson."

He looked about him when his speech was done
As one who feareth somewhat, but the word
He last had said, nought new belike had stirred
In those three hearts; Bodli still paced the floor
With downcast eyes, that sometimes to the door
Were lifted; Ospak beat upon the board
A swift tune with his hand; without a word
The gold ring from her finger Gudrun drew
And gave it to the man; and Ospak knew
A gift of Bodli Thorleikson therein,
Given when first her promise he did win.
Yet little wisdom seemed it to those men
About the daïs to abide as then,
Though one turned o'er his shoulder as he went,
And saw how Ospak unto Gudrun leant
And nodded head at Bodli, and meanwhile
Thrust his forefinger with a mocking smile
At his own breast; but Gudrun saw him not,
Though their eyes met, nay, rather scarce had got
A thought of Bodli in her heart, for still
"Kiartan come back again," her soul did fill,
"And I shall see him soon, with what changed eyes!"

And now did night o'er the world's miseries
Draw her dark veil, yet men with stolen light
Must win from restless day a restless night;
Then Gudrun 'gan bestir her, with a smile
Talking of common things a little while;
For Bodli to his seat had come again
And sat him down, though labour spent in vain
It was to speak to him; dull the night went,
And there the most of men were well content
When bed-time came at last. Then one by one
They left the hall till Bodli sat alone
Within the high-seat. No thought then he had
Clear to himself, except that all was bad
That henceforth was to come to him; the night
Went through its changes, light waned after light,
Until but one was left far down the hall
Casting a feeble circle on the wall,
Making the well-known things as strange as death;
Then through the windows came the night's last breath,
And 'gainst the yellow glimmer they showed blue
As the late summer dawn o'er Iceland drew;
And still he sat there, noting nought at all
Till at his back he heard a light footfall,
And fell a-trembling, yet he knew not why;
Nor durst he turn to look, till presently
He knew a figure was beside him, white
In the half dusk of the departing night,
For the last light had died; therewith he strove
To cry aloud, and might not, his tongue clove
Unto his mouth, no power he had to stand
Upon his feet, he might not bring his hand,
How much soe'er he tried, to his sword's hilt;
It seemed to him his sorrow and his guilt
Stood there in bodily form before his eyes,
Yet, when a dreadful voice did now arise
He knew that Gudrun spake:

"I came again
Because I lay awake, and thought how men
Have told of traitors, and I needs must see
How such an one to-night would look to me.
Night hides thee not, O Bodli Thorleikson,
Nor shall death hide from thee what thou hast done.
—What!—thou art grown afraid, thou tremblest then
Because I name death, seed of fearless men?
Fear not, I bear no sword, Kiartan is kind,
He will not slay thee because he was blind
And took thee for a true man time a-gone.
—My curse upon thee! Knowst thou how alone
Thy deed hath made me? Dreamest thou what pain
Burns in me now when he has come again?
Now, when the longed-for sun has risen at last
To light an empty world whence all has passed
Of joy and hope—great is thy gain herein!
A bitter broken thing to seem to win,
A soul the fruit of lies shall yet make vile;
A body for thy base lust to defile,
If thou durst come anigh me any more,
Now I have curst thee, that thy mother bore
So base a wretch among good men to dwell,
That thou mightst build me up this hot-walled hell.
—I curse thee now, while good and evil strive
Within me, but if longer I shall live
What shall my curse be then? myself so curst,
That nought shall then be left me but the worst,
That God shall mock himself for making me."

Breathless she stopped, but Bodli helplessly
Put forth his hands till he gained speech, and said
In a low voice, "Would God that I were dead!
And yet a word from him I hope to have
Kinder than this before I reach the grave!"

"Yea, he is kind, yea, he is kind!" she cried,
"He loveth all, and casts his kindness wide
Even as God; nor loves me more than God
Loves one amongst us crawlers o'er earth's sod.
And who knows how I love him? how I hate
Each face on which he looks compassionate!
—God help me! I am talking of my love
To thee! and such a traitor I may prove
As thou hast, ere the tale is fully done."

She turned from him therewith to get her gone,
But lingered yet, as waiting till he spake;
Day dawned apace, the sparrows 'gan to wake
Within the eaves; the trumpet of the swan
Sounded from far; the morn's cold wind, that ran
O'er the hall's hangings, reached her unbound hair,
And drave the night-gear round her body fair,
And stirred the rushes by her naked feet:
Most fair she was—their eyes a while did meet,
In a strange look, he rose with haggard face
And trembling lips, that body to embrace,
For which all peace for ever he had lost,
But wildly o'er her head her arms she tossed,
And with one dreadful look she fled away
And left him 'twixt the dark night and the day,
'Twixt good and ill, 'twixt love and struggling hate,
The coming hours of restless pain to wait.

The Yule-feast at Bathstead.

Now the days wore, and nowise Kiartan stirred,
Or seemed as he would stir, and no man heard
Speech from him of the twain, for good or ill;
Yet was his father Olaf anxious still,
And doubted that the smouldering fire might blaze,
For drearily did Kiartan pass his days
After a while, and ever silently
Would sit and watch the weary sun go by,
Feeling as though the heart in him were dead.

Kálf Asgeirson came to the Peacock's stead
With Refna, more than once that autumn-tide;
And at the last folk 'gan to whisper wide
That she was meet for him, if anyone
Might now mate Kiartan, since Gudrun was gone.
If Kiartan heard this rumour I know not,
But Refna heard it and her heart waxed hot
With foolish hopes; for one of those she was
Who seem across the weary earth to pass,
That they may show what burden folk may bear
Of unrequited love, nor drawing near
The goal they aim at, die amidst the noise
Of clashing lusts with scarce-complaining voice.
God wot that Kiartan in his bitter need
To her kind eyes could pay but little heed;
Yet did he note that she looked kind on him,
Nor yet had all his kindness grown so dim
That he might pass her by all utterly,
And thereof came full many a biting lie.

Now as the time drew on toward Yule once more,
Did Oswif send, as his wont was of yore,
To bid the men of Herdholt to the feast;
And howso things had changed, both most and least
'Gan make them ready, all but Kiartan, who
That morn went wandering aimless to and fro
Amid the bustling groups, and spake no word.
To whom came Olaf when thereof he heard,
And spake with anxious face: "O noble son,
Wilt thou still harbour wrath for what is done?
Nay, let the past be past; young art thou yet,

And many another honour mayst thou get,
And many another love."
Kiartan turned round,
And said, "Yea, good sooth, love doth much abound
In this kind world! Lo! one more loved my love
Than I had deemed of—thus it oft shall prove!"

So spake he sneering and high-voiced, then said,
As he beheld his father's grizzled head
And puckered brow: "What wouldst thou, father? see!
Here in thy house do I sit quietly,
And let all folk live even suchlike life
As they love best; and wilt thou wake up strife?"

"Nay, nay, son; but thou knowest that thy mood,
So lonely here, shall bring thee little good;
Thy grief grows greater as thou nursest it,
Nor 'neath thy burden ever shalt thou sit
As it increases on thee; then shall come
A dreadful tale on this once happy home.
Come rather, show all men thou wilt have peace
By meeting them, and it shall bring thee ease,
That sight once over, to think how thou art
A brave man still, not sitting with crushed heart
Amid the stirring world."
Then Kiartan gazed
Long on his father, as a man amazed,
But said at last: "Ah, thou must have thy will!
God wot I looked that the long days would kill
This bitter longing, if unfed it were
By sights and sounds. Now let the long days bear
Their fated burden! I will go with thee."

So like a dreaming man did Kiartan see
That place which once seemed holy in his eyes;
No cry of fury to his lips did rise
When o'er the threshold first he went, and saw
Bodli the son of Thorleik towards him draw,
Blood-red for shame at first, then pale for shame,
As from his lips the old kind speeches came,
And hand met hand. Coldly he spake, and said:

"Be merry, Bodli; thou art nobly wed!
Thou hadst the toil, and now the due reward
Is fallen to thee."
Then, like a cutting sword,
A sharp pain pierced him, as he saw far off
Gudrun's grey eyes turn, with a spoken scoff,
To meet his own; and there the two men stood,
Each knowing somewhat of the other's mood,
Yet scarce the master-key thereto; still stared
Kiartan at Gudrun; and his heart grew hard
With his despair: but toward him Bodli yearned,
As one who well that bitter task had learned;
And now he reached once more to him his hand,
But moveless for a while did Kiartan stand,
And had in heart to get him back again:
Yet with strong will he put aback his pain,
And passed by Bodli, noting him no whit,
And coldly at the feast that day did sit,
In outward seeming; and Gudrun no less
Sat in her place in perfect loveliness,
Untouched by passion: Bodli in meanwhile
From Kiartan's grave brow unto Gudrun's smile
Kept glancing, and in feverish eager wise
Strove to pierce through the mask of bitter lies
That hid the bitter truth; and still must fear,
Lest from the feast's noise he a shriek should hear,
When the thin dream-veil, torn across, should show
That in the very hell he lay alow.

Men say that when the guests must leave the place,
Bodli with good gifts many a man did grace,
And at the last bade bring up to the door
Three goodly horses such as ne'er before
Had Iceland seen, and turned his mournful eyes
To Kiartan's face, stern with the memories
Of many a past departing, bitter-sweet,
And said:
"O cousin, O my friend, unmeet
Is aught that here I have, for thy great fame,
Yet if it please thee still to be the same
As thou hast been to us, take these of me."

But as men crowded round about to see
The goodly steeds, spake Kiartan in low voice:
"Strive not with fate, for thou hast made thy choice;
Thy gifts, thy love, may scarce now heal my heart—
—Look not so kind—God keep us well apart!"

No more they spake as then, but straightway rode
The Herdholt men unto their fair abode;
And so it fell that on the homeward way
'Gan Olaf to his well-loved son to say:

"Kiartan, howe'er the heart in thee did burn,
Unto no evil did this meeting turn;
Yet would that thou hadst taken gifts from him!
Now thou wilt go again?"
"My eyes are dim,
Belike, O father, with my bitter pain;
Yet doubt thou not but I shall go again,
E'en as I doubt not that fresh misery
I there shall gather as the days pass by.
Would I could tell thee all I think, and how
I deem thy wise hand dreadful seed doth sow!"

Kiartan weds Refna.

I think that Gudrun on the morrow morn
Deemed herself yet more wretched and forlorn
Than e'er before; I deem that Kiartan woke
And found it harder yet to bear the yoke
Than in past days—their eyes had met at last,
No look of anger from them had been cast
Sweet words might take away; no look of woe
A touch might turn to pleasure, none can know
But those who know the torturer Love, the bliss
That heals the stripes those bear who still are his.
Who knows what tale had been to tell, if she
Had met his first proud look all tearfully,
With weak imploring looks? Ah, sore she yearned
To cry aloud the things that in her burned,
To cast aside all fear and shame, and kneel
Before his feet, so she his lips might feel
Once more as in the old days; but, alas!
A wall of shame and wrong betwixt them was,
Nor could the past deeds ever be undone.
Sometimes it might be when they were alone
In quiet times—in evening twilight, when
Far off and softened came the voice of men;
Or, better yet, the murmur of the sea
Smote on the hearts of either peacefully,
Each to each kind would seem; until there came
The backward rush of pain and bitter blame
Unanswerable, cold, blighting, as the sea,
Let in o'er flowers—"Why didst thou so to me,
To me of all the world? while others strove,
We looked to hold the sweetness of our love.
Yea, if earth failed beneath our feet—and now
How is the sweet turned bitter!—yea, and thou
Art just so nigh to me, that still thou art
A restless anguish to my craving heart."

Take note too midst all this, that Gudrun heard
Rumoured about this added bitter word,
That Refna, Asgeir's daughter, looked to wear
The coif the Norway queen had meant for her,
When Kiartan left that broken heart behind;
For that tale too her hungry ears must find.
Then would she clean forget all other woe,
In thinking how she dreamed the days would go,
That while she waited doubting nought of him;
Then would the past and future wax all dim
In brooding o'er that unaccomplished bliss,
In moaning to herself, 'twixt kiss and kiss,
The things she would have said, in picturing,
As in the hopeful time, how arms would cling
About her, and sweet eyes, unsatisfied
E'en with the fulness of all bliss, would hide
No love from her—and she forgot those eyes
What they were now, all dulled with miseries;
And she forgot the sorrow of the heart
That fate and time from hers had thrust apart.
Still wrong bred wrong within her; day by day
Some little speck of kindness fell away,
Till in her heart naked desire alone
Was left, the one thing not to be undone.
Then would the jealous flame in such wise burn
Within her, that to Bodli would she turn,
And madden him with fond caressing touch
And tender word; and he, worn overmuch
With useless striving, still his heart would blind,
Unto the dread awaking he should find.

Doubt not, that of this too had Kiartan heard,
If nought but idle babbling men had stirred;
But more there was; for the fierce-hearted fools,
The sons of Oswif, made these twain their tools
To satisfy their envious hate; for they
Waxed eviller-hearted as day followed day,
Grudging the Peacock's house its luck and fame;
And when into their household Bodli came,
In such wise as ye know, with hate and scorn,
Which still they had, of his grave face and worn,
A joy began to mingle presently,
A thought that they through him might get to see
Herdholt beneath their feet in grief and shame;
So cunningly they turned them to the game
As such men will, and scattered wide the seeds,
Lies, and words half-true, of the bitterest deeds.
For doubt not, kindly-natured though he were,
That Kiartan too was changing: who would hear
Such things as once he heard, from one who went
'Twixt the two houses, with no ill intent,
But blabbing and a fool, well stuffed with lies,
At Ospak's hands—for in most loving wise
The new-wed folk lived now, he said; soon too
He deemed would Bodli draw to him a crew,
And take ship for the southlands: "Nought at all
Was talked of last night in the Bathstead hall,
But about England and King Ethelred."

"Well, and was Gudrun merry?" Haldor said,
Yet stammered saying it, 'neath Kiartan's frown,
Who cleared his brow though, nor e'en looked adown
As the man answered, smiling, pleased to show
That he somewhat of great folk's minds did know:

"Yea, marry, was she merry. Good cause why,
For she will go with Bodli certainly,
And win such fame as women love to do;
Ye well may wot he saith no nay thereto,
If she but ask him; they sat hand in hand
As if no folk were left in all the land
Except themselves."
He stayed his talk hereat,
For men looked strangely on him as he sat
Smiling and careless, casting words that bit

Like poisoned darts: no less did Kiartan sit
With unchanged face, nor rose to go away,
Yea, even strove within himself to say:
"Good luck go with them! mine she cannot be;
May she be happy, here, or over sea!
Why should I wish aught ill on them to fall?"

And yet, indeed, a flood of bitterest gall
Swept o'er his heart; despite himself he thought:
"So now, to lonely ways behold me brought,
She will not miss me more—so change the days,
And Bodli's loving looks and Bodli's praise
Shall be enough for her. I am alone,
And ne'er shall be aught else—would I were gone
From where none need me now—belike my fame
Shall be forgotten, wrapped in Bodli's name,
E'en as my kisses on the lips, that once
Trembled with longing through the change of suns—
Those years in Norway shall be blotted out
From song and story—yea, or men shall doubt
If I or Bodli there that praise did win—
What say I? for I deem that men begin
To doubt if e'er I loved my love at all!"

So thought he, mid the clamour of the hall,
Where few men knew his heart, but rather thought
That he began now somewhat to be brought
From out his gloom; withal, time wore away,
And certainly as day comes after day,
So change comes after change in minds of men;
So otherwise he 'gan to be, than when
In early days his pain, nigh cherished, clung
Unto his wounded heart; belike it stung
Bitterer at whiles, now that he knew his life,
And hardened him to meet the lingering strife
'Gainst the cold world that would not think of him
Too much. The kindness of old days waxed dim
Within his heart; he hearkened when men spake
Hard things about his love, for whose dear sake
Had fame once seemed so light a thing to win.
A blacker deed now seemed his fellow's sin
When lesser seemed the prize that it did gain;
Little by little from his bitter pain
Fell off the softening veil of tenderness;
Moody and brooding was he none the less,
And all the world, with all its good and ill,
Seemed nothing meet to move his sluggish will.

And now a whole long year had passed, since he
Stood wildered by the borders of the sea
Neath his first sorrow. Herdholt late had seen
A noble feast, and thereat had there been
Among the guests Refna, the tender maid;
Gentle of mood, and pale, with head down-weighed
She sat amidst the feast; and Kiartan saw
That much she changed as he anigh did draw,
That her eyes brightened, and a sprightlier grace
Came o'er her lips, and colour lit her face.
And so when all the guests therefrom were gone,
Thurid, his sister, sat with him alone
Close upon sunset; thoughtful now was she,
He gayer than it was his wont to be,
And many things he spake to her; at last
The absent look from off her face she cast,
For she had listened little; and she said:
"Yea, brother, is she not a lovesome maid?"

He started, "Who?" he said, "I noted not."

She smiled, "Nay, then is beauty soon forgot;
Yet if I were a man, not old or wise,
Methinks I should remember wide grey eyes,
Lips like a scarlet thread, skin lily-white,
Round chin, smooth brow 'neath the dark hair's delight,
Fair neck, slim hands, and dainty limbs, well hid
Since unto most of men doth fate forbid
To hold them as their own."
A dark cloud spread
O'er Kiartan's face: "Sister, forbear," he said;
"I am no lover; unto me but nought
Are these things grown."
Nigher her face she brought
To his, and said: "And yet were I a man,
And noted how the love of me began
To move within the heart of such a maid
As Refna is, not soon her face would fade
From out my memory."
"Nay, nay, nay, thou sayst
Fools' words," he said, "and every word dost waste;
Who shall love broken men like unto me?"

And therewithal he sprang up angrily
And would be gone: she stayed him: "Were it so
That over well she loved; what wouldst thou do?"

"What should I do?" he said; "I have no heart
To give away, let her e'en act my part
And find the days right dreary, yet live on."

"Methinks," she said, "the end will soon be won
For her, poor maid! surely she waneth fast."

And Thurid sighed withal; but Kiartan passed
Swiftly away from her: and yet he went
Unto his bed that night less ill content,
And ere he slept, of Ingibiorg he thought,
And all the pleasure her sweet love had brought
While he was with her; and this maid did seem
Like her come back amidst a happy dream.
The next morn came, and through his dreariness
A sweet thought somewhat did his heart caress;

Howe'er he put it from him, back it came
Until it gathered shape, and took the name
Of pity, and seemed worthy to be nursed.
So wore the days, and life seemed not so cursed
With this to think of—this so set apart
From all the misery that wrung his heart;
Until the sweet ruth grew, until he deemed
That yet perchance her love was only dreamed,
That she was heart-whole, yea, or loved indeed
But for another man was in such need:
And at that thought blank grew the world again,
And his old pain was shot across with pain
As woof hides warp. Ah, well! what will you have?
This was a man some shreds of joy to save
From out the wreck, if so he might, to win
Some garden from the waste, and dwell therein.
And yet he lingered long, or e'er he told
His heart that it another name might hold
With that of the lost Gudrun. Time and sight
Made Refna's love clear as the noonday light;
Yea, nowise hard it was for him to think
That she without this joy would quickly sink
Into death's arms—and she, she to fade thus,
God's latest marvel! eyes so piteous
With such sweet longing, midst her beauty rare,
As though they said, "Nought worthy thee is here,
Yet help me if thou canst: yet, if I die,
Like sweet embalmment round my heart shall lie
This love, this love, this love I have for thee;
Look once again before thou leavest me!"

She died not wholly joyless; they were wed,
When twenty changing moons their light had shed
On the dark waves of Burgfirth, since in trust
Of Gudrun's love, over the bridge new thrust
From out the ship, the much-praised Kiartan ran.
So strangely shift men's lives in little span.

The Sword comes back without the Scabbard.

When of this wedding first came tidings true
To Bathstead, then it was that Gudrun knew
How much of hope had been before that day
Within her heart; now, when a cast-away
Upon the lonely rocks of life, she was
With nought to help whate'er might come to pass;
Deaf, dumb, and blind, long hours she went about
Her father's house, till folk began to doubt
If she would ever speak a word again;
Nay, scarce yet could she think about her pain,
Or e'en know what it was, but seemed to face
Some huge blank wall within a lonely place.
And Bodli watched her with a burning heart
Baffled and beaten back; yet for his part
Something like hope 'gan flit before his eyes,
Hope of some change e'en if new miseries
Wrapped it about.
As on a day she went
Slow-footed through the hall without intent,
Taking no heed of aught, of Kiartan's name
She heard one speak, and to her stunned heart came
A flash of hope and pain, against her will
Her foot must stay her; and she stood there still,
And turning round she saw where Ospak stood,
And slowly talking in a sullen mood
Unto his brother Thorolf; but they made
As though they saw her not, and Ospak said:

"Thou art young, Thorolf, and thy words are vain,
So it has been, so it shall be again,
One man shall deem all others made for him,
And 'neath his greatness shall all fame grow dim;
Till on a day men try if he is man—
Eh! what then falleth—let him, if he can,
Play Thor among the mannikins, and cast
The swords aback when he is caught at last."

"Hist!" Thorolf said; "there sister Gudrun goes!
Kiartan has froze her heart up: stand we close!"

Then Ospak laughed: "She will not hear us yet,
She hath a hope she cannot quite forget,
That he who twice has flung her love aside,
Will come some day to claim her as his bride,
When he has slain our long-faced champion there!
Good sooth, the house of Hauskuld waxeth fair,
We shall have kings in Iceland ere our day
Is quite gone by."
Slowly she gat away
Stung to the heart by those coarse words of hate,
Wondering withal what new thought lay in wait
To change her life; she sat her down alone
And covered up her face, and one by one
Strove to recall the happy days gone by,
And wondering why they passed so happily;
While yet none strove for happiness; at last
She raised her head up and a glance she cast
Unto the open door, and down the hall
A streak of sun on Bodli's head did fall
As he turned round and saw her; then she said
Unto herself: "Nay, then, love is not dead
Since Bodli lives: why should I hate him then
Because he heeded not the shame of men
Amidst his love? but thou, I once called love,
On whom I flung my heart, with whom I strove
For ever, thy weak measured love to make
Equal to mine, what didst thou for my sake?
Thy soul is saved, thy fame is won, and thou
Hast a fair damsel's arms about thee now—

Not mine—and thou art happy. Who can tell,
O Bodli Thorleikson, but down in hell
We twain shall love, and love, and love again,
When the first wave of the eternal pain
Has washed our folly from us, and I know
Why upon earth I loved a weak heart so
That loved me not, while I was ice to thee,
O loving lovesome traitor."
Wearily
She hung her head with parted lips awhile;
Silent she sat, until a bitter smile
Bemocked her face: "Yet if I call thee love,
And kiss thee with sweet kisses, such as move
Great men to great deeds, trust me not too much
But think of honied words and tremulous touch
As things that slay. If Kiartan lay there dead,
How I should love him!"
Once more sank her head,
And long she sat in silence, till at last
She heard how Bodli toward her bower passed,
And rose and met him coldly, with no sign
That anywise her vexed heart did incline
To ease the bitter burden that he bore.

Unheeding all, the year moved as before,
And autumn came again. What hearts soe'er
The younger folk each unto each might bear,
Olaf and Oswif chose to shut their eyes,
And close their ears, as peaceful men and wise,
And make believe that nought amiss there was
'Twixt the two houses; so it came to pass
That Bathstead to the Herdholt feast did go
At autumn-tide once more at least; and though
Kiartan was loth enow those folk to face,
Yet so hard Olaf prayed that he would grace
His father's house with his great fame, and sit,
Yet once again while he might look at it,
A glory to the feast, that he put by
His doubts once more, and there with troubled eye
Noted the twain among the Bathstead crowd,
And Oswif's ill sons, insolent and loud,
And turned pale when the words of greeting came
From out his lips. Meanwhile, with shrinking shame
And anxious heart, did Refna gaze upon
Gudrun's great beauty, deeming she had won
A troublous lot; and Kiartan, noting that,
And how scarce like the mistress there she sat,
Yet to his eyes seemed fairer, because love
Had forged the fear that so her heart did move,
Grew wroth that still so many memories
Must vex his heart, and turn aside his eyes
To Gudrun, the world's wonder there, whose face,
Now coldly watchful, scanned the busy place.

Men say that at this feast three things betid,
Whereby the flame the elders deemed well hid,
Showed through the heap of smouldering love and hate.
First, when the new-come guests did stand and wait
Till they were marshalled to their seats, the maid
Who did this for the women turned and said
To Kiartan, "Who the high-seat fills to-day
Beside the goodwife?"
In most bright array
Stood Gudrun, gazing ever at the bride,
As though she saw not anything beside;
And Kiartan noted her, and therewith deemed
That in her eyes a look of hate there gleamed,
And saw withal Refna's soft eyes fall down
Before hers; then he spake out, with a frown:

"Nay, thou art foolish, damsel: who shall sit
In the best place, if I may deal with it,
Saving my wife?" But as he said the word,
The struggling devil so his vexed heart stirred,
That he must look at Gudrun; their eyes met,
Paler she grew than he had seen her yet,
Then red as blood; but he waxed wroth and said:

"Ah, wert thou e'en so foolish, then, O maid?
For such a guest belike we have got here
As thinketh everything of great or dear,
Honour, and hearts of men, and women's tears
Are but for her." Then tingling took the ears
Of those that stood thereby; as he strode off,
Gudrun's cold smile was bitterer than a scoff
Spoken aloud: but Ospak laughed, and said
In a loud whisper, close to Bodli's head:

"Nay, thou shalt have to fight for Gudrun yet,
Even though Refna did the bride-bed get.
He deems our sister may not quench the thought
Of all the joy she erst to Herdholt brought.
Ah, we shall yet see Refna lie a-cold,
Brother-in-law, unless thou waxest bold."

Such a beginning to the feast there was.

Moreover, the next day it came to pass,
As folk ere supper sported in the hall,
That unto her did goodwife Thorgerd call
The gentle Refna, bidding her as one
Who well might bid, to do the rich coif on,
The wonder of the Greeks, the fair queen's gift:
Then Refna reddened, and her eyes did lift
To Kiartan, e'en as asking him thereof;
But he spake nought, her soft look might not move
His heart from deep thought; so she went her ways,
Scarce happy 'neath his far-off moody gaze,
And came back glittering like a new-born star,
And sat upon the daïs seen afar

Down the dusk hall. Then Ospak noted how
Gudrun turned pale, and he his teeth did show
Like a crossed hound, and muttered:
"Past belief,
As men may deem it, sister, yet a thief
Asgeir begat; for 'longeth not that gold
To Bathstead, if the tale be rightly told?"

Now Kiartan seemed to wake as from a dream,
When in the torches' flare that gold did gleam,
And went across to Refna's side, and said,
Smiling and whispering: "More I love thy head
Uncovered, O my love; yea, and withal,
Sharp swords thy helm from out their sheaths may call:
Look down there, how the sons of Oswif scowl
Around poor Bodli's face; the storm doth growl
Afar already—nay, nay, fear thee nought!—
But good I deemed it thou shouldst know my thought."

Sour and sick-hearted Gudrun turned away,
Noting how Kiartan's hand on Refna's lay,
And how their cheeks were close each unto each.
And Refna's eyes that love did so beseech,
Her soft mouth, tremulous with longing sore
For yet more kisses, long time hung before
Her weary eyes upon that weary night,
Yea, and till mirth of men was slain by light.

Hearken once more: the morn the guests should go,
About the stead Kiartan went to and fro,
Busied in such things, as his father's son,
For honour's very sake, must see well done;
And as he ordered how the folk should ride,
His sword, "The King's Gift" named, which by his side
Was ever wont to hang, upon his bed
He left awhile, and, when the guests were sped,
Came back to seek the same, and found it gone.
Then questioning there was of everyone,
And mighty trouble; An the Black meanwhile,
A sturdy house-carle, slipped out with a smile,
Just as old Olaf to his son 'gan talk
In such wise:
"Son, hate far abroad will walk
E'en when new-born, although we nurse it not:
Now my heart tells me much must be forgot,
Many words hidden, many sights be seen
By thine eyes only, son, if I, between
Death and the end of life shall see thee last;
And hold thy living hands as life goes past,
Mine eyes a-waxing dim: wait then, and hope:
Thou shalt grow stronger with the world to cope,
If thou sitt'st down with patience, casting not
Long days and sweet on drawing of a lot."

Such things and more he spake, and Kiartan heard
With kind eyes, if his heart were little stirred.
But, as they sat and talked thereof, came back,
Smiling, but panting sorely, An the Black,
And in his cloak he carried something wrapped.

"Well," Olaf said, "and what new thing hath happed?"

"Soon told," said An; "I followed them afar,
Knowing what thieves those Bathstead skinkers are,
And at the peat moss where the road doth wind
About the dale, young Thorolf lagged behind;
I saw him take a something from his cloak,
And thrust it down just where the stream doth soak
The softest through the peat; then swift again
Ride on: so when they might not see me plain,
O ho, says I, and comes up to the place,
And here and there I peer with careful face
Until at last I draw this fair thing forth;
—A pity though, the scabbard is of worth!
Clean gone it is."
Then from his cloak he drew
"The King's Gift" bright and naked. Olaf grew
Joyous thereover, praising An right well.
But Kiartan 'gan to gloom: "Ah, who can tell,"
He muttered, as he took the sword to him,
"But this shall end the troublous tale and dim?—
Well, I at least cast not the sheath away;
Bewail not ye too much, who have to pay
For pleasure gained; his may the worst hap be,
Who best can bear the pain and misery."

The Stealing of the Coif.

Now howso Olaf bade An hold his peace,
And Kiartan promised he would nowise cease
To show a good face to the world on all
That 'twixt the houses yet might chance to fall,
Certain it is, that ere long, far and wide
The tale was known, throughout the country-side;
Nay, more than this, to Kiartan's ears it came
That Oswif's sons deemed they had cast a shame
On Herdholt, and must mock him openly
And call him "Mire-blade," e'en when those were by
Who held him of the most account; no less
Kiartan was moved not from his quietness,
Nor did aught hap 'twixt autumn and Yule-tide;
Then men at Herdholt busied them to ride
To Bathstead once again, and Olaf said:

"Wilt thou once more be guided by my head,
Son Kiartan, and with brave heart go to face
The troublous things that wait thee in that place?"

"Well," Kiartan said, "if so I deemed, that fate
Might be turned back of men, or foolish hate
Die out for lack of fuel, no more would I
Unto the Bathstead hall-door draw anigh;
But forasmuch as now I know full well,
That the same story there shall be to tell
Whether I go, or whether I refrain,
Let all be as thou wilt; and yet we twain
Not oft again, O father, side by side
Unto this merry-making place shall ride."

Then Olaf sighed, as though indeed he knew
To what an end his latter days now drew.

So now all folk were ready there, but when
The women came their ways to meet the men,
Said Thorgerd unto Refna: "Well, this tide
Thou hast the coif, no doubt, and like a bride
Hast heart to look midst those whose hearts are cold
To thee and thine."
Then Refna did behold
Thorgerd's stern face in trembling wise, and said:
"Nay, goodwife, what fair cloth may coif my head
Shall matter little midst the many things
Men have to talk of: rise and fall of kings
And changes of the world: within my chest
The coif lies."
"There," said Kiartan, "might it rest
For thee and me, sweet; yet I mind indeed
When I, a froward child, deemed I had need
Of some sharp glittering thing, as axe or knife,
But little would my mother raise up strife
With me therefor, and even as I would
I cut myself: so if she think this good
Let fetch the Queen's Gift."
Refna looked adown
Shamefaced and puzzled, Thorgerd with a frown
Turned upon Kiartan, but he smiled in turn,
And said: "Yea, mother, let the red gold burn
Among the lights at Bathstead; great am I
E'en as thou deem'st; and men must let pass by
Their hatred to me, whatso say their hearts;
Come, open-handed let us play our parts."

So was the coif brought, and once more they rode
Unto the door of Oswif's fair abode;
And there they feasted merrily enow—
—Such of them as were fools, or cared not how
The next week went—and at the highest tide
Of all the feast, sat Refna as a bride
Coifed with the Queen's Gift; Gudrun stern and cold
Scarce would the tender face of her behold,
Or cast a look at Kiartan; rather she
Did press the hand of Bodli lovingly,
Softening her face for him alone of all:
Then would strange tumult on his spirit fall,
Mingled of pain and uttermost delight
To think the whole world had so swerved from right
To give him pleasure for a little while,
Nor durst he look upon his old friend's smile,
Who, glad with his own manhood seemed to be
Once more, once more the brave heart frank and free;
As though at last the trouble and the coil
That wrapped him round, and made him sadly toil
Through weary days, had fallen all clean away,
And smiling he might meet the bitterest day.

So passed the high-tide forth unto its end,
But when at last folk from the place would wend,
And Refna fain would have the coif of her
Whose office was to tend the women's gear—
—Lo, it was gone—then Refna trembled sore,
And passing through the crowd about the door
Whispered to Kiartan: Ospak stood anigh
And bit his lips, and watched her eagerly,
And Kiartan with a side-long glance could see
His colour come and go, and cried:
"Let be;
Light won, light gone! if still it is 'bove ground,
Doubt thou not, Refna, it shall yet be found."

Folk looked on one another; Thorgerd said,
Turning on Gudrun: "Small account is made
Of great folk's gifts, then; I have seen the day
When Egil's kin a man or two would slay
For things less worth than this."
Her angry frown
Gudrun met calmly: "Was the thing his own?
Then let him do e'en as he will with it;
Small loss it is methinks for her to sit
Without his old love's gift upon her head!"

Ere Thorgerd answered, Kiartan cried, and said:
"Come swift to saddle! Cousin, ride with me,
Until we turn the hill anigh the sea;
I fain would speak with thee a word or twain
That I have striven to think about in vain
These last days that we met."
Bodli flushed red
And looked adown: "So be it then," he said.
Then stammered and turned pale, and said, "Enow
Shall one sword be to-day betwixt us two;
Take thou the rover's weapon, O fair wife."

She looked on him, her lovely face was rife
With many thoughts, but Kiartan's kindly gaze
Seemed to bring back the thoughts of happier days

To both of them, and swift away she passed
Unto her bower; and men were horsed at last,
And sharp the hoofs upon the hard way rung.
So as into the saddle Kiartan swung,
He leant toward Ospak, and said mockingly:
"I love thee—I would not that thou shouldst die;
So see me not too oft, because I have
A plague sometimes, that bringeth to the grave
Those that come nigh me; live on well and whole!"

Then to his face rushed Ospak's envious soul,
His hand fell on his sword-hilt as he shrank
Back to the doorway, while the fresh air drank
Kiartan's clear laughter, as their company
Rode jingling down unto the hoary sea.

But the last smile from off his face was gone,
When silent, in a while he rode alone
With Bodli silent: then he said to him:
"Thou seest, Bodli, how we twain must swim
Adown a strange stream—thou art weaponless
To-day, and certes bides my sword no less
Within its scabbard—how long shall it last?"

Then Bodli cried, "Until my life is past—
Shall I take life from thee as well as love?"

"Nay," Kiartan said, "be not too sure thereof,
Bethink thee where by thine own deed thou art
Betwixt a passionate woman's hungry heart,
And the vile envy of a dangerous fool;
Doubt not but thou art helpless, and the tool
Of thy mad love, and that ill comes from ill,
And as a thing begins, so ends it still—
—Nay, not to preach to thee I brought thee here,
Rather to say that the old days are dear,
Despite of all, unto my weary heart.
And now methinks from them and thee I part
This day; not unforgiven, whatsoe'er
Thou at my hands, or I at thine may bear.
For I too—shall I guide myself indeed,
Or rather be so driven by hard need
That still my hand as in a dream shall be,
While clearly sees the heart that is in me
Desires I may not try to bring to pass?
So since no more it may be as it was
In the past days, when fair and orderly
The world before our footsteps seemed to lie,
Now in this welter wherein we are set,
Lonely and bare of all, deem we not yet
That each for each these ill days we have made;
Rather the more let those good words be weighed
We spake, when truth and love within us burned,
Before the lesson of our life was learned.
What say'st thou? are the days to come forgiven,
Shall folk remember less that we have striven,
Than that we loved, when all the tale is told?"

Then long did Bodli Kiartan's face behold,
Striving for speech: then said, "Why speak'st thou so?
Twice over now I seem my deed to do,
Twice over strive to wake as from a dream,
That I, once happy, never real may deem,
So vile and bitter is it; may thy sword
If e'er we meet be sharper than thy word,
And make a speedy end of doubt and strife;
Fear not to take much from me, taking life!"

Still seemed the air filled with his words when he
Turned back to Bathstead, and the murmuring sea
Seemed from afar to speak of rest from pain.
Then on a little knoll he shortened rein,
And turned about, and looking toward the hill
Beheld the spear of Kiartan glittering still,
When all the rest of him behind the brow
Was sunken; but the spear sank quickly now,
And slowly home withal did Bodli ride,
E'en as he might the coming end to bide.

Refna hears Women talking.

So the days wore with nothing new to tell,
Till spring-tide once more on the country fell,
Then on a night as Kiartan to his bed
Would go, still Refna sat with bowed-down head
And stirred not, nor a while would speak, when he
Spake to her in kind words and lovingly;
At last she lifted up a face, wherein
Somewhat did trouble upon sorrow win,
And said:

"Indeed of all thy grief I knew,
But deemed if still thou saw'st me kind and true,
Not asking too much, yet not failing aught
To show that not far off need love be sought,
If thou shouldst need love—if thou sawest all this,
Thou wouldst not grudge to show me what a bliss
Thy whole love was, by giving unto me
As unto one who loved thee silently,
Now and again the broken crumbs thereof:
Alas! I, having then no part in love,
Knew not how nought, nought can allay the soul
Of that sad thirst, but love untouched and whole!
Kinder than e'er I durst have hoped thou art;
Forgive me then, that yet my craving heart
Is so unsatisfied; I know that thou
Art fain to dream that I am happy now,
And for that seeming ever do I strive;
Thy half-love, dearest, keeps me still alive
To love thee; and I bless it—but at whiles"—

So far she spake till her weak quivering smiles
Faded before the bitterness of love.
Her face changed, and her passion 'gan to move

Within her breast until the sobs came fast,
And down upon her hands her face she cast,
And by the pain of tears her heart did gain
A little respite; nor might she refrain
From weeping yet, when Kiartan's arms she felt
About her, and for long her fair lips dwelt
With hungry longing on his lips, and he
Spake to her:

"O poor lover, long may we
Live upon earth, till lover and beloved
Each is to each, by one desire moved;
And whereas thou dost say to me, Forgive,
Forgive me rather! A short while to live
Once seemed the longest life of man to me,
Wherein my love of the old years to see;
But could I die now, and be born again
To give my whole heart up to ease thy pain,
A short while would I choose to live indeed.
But is it not so, sweet, that thou hast need
To tell me of a thing late seen or heard?
Surely by some hap thy dear heart is stirred
From out its wonted quiet; ease thine heart
And 'twixt us twain thy fear and grief depart!"

She looked up: "Yea, kind love, I thought to tell
Of no great thing that yesterday befell.
Why should I vex thee with it? Yet thy fame,
If I must say the word, in question came
Therein. Yet prithee, mark it not too much!"

He smiled and said: "Nay, be the tidings such
As mean my death, speak out and hide not aught!"

She sat a little while, as though she thought
How best to speak, then said: "The day being good,
About noon yesterday in peaceful mood
I wandered by the brook-side, and at last
Behind a great grey stone myself I cast,
And slept, as fate would have it; when I woke
At first I did but note the murmuring brook,
But as my hearing and my sight did clear
The sound of women's voices did I hear,
And in the stream two maidens did I see,
Our housefolk, and belike they saw not me,
Since I lay low adown, and up the stream
Their faces turned; I from a half-sweet dream,
I know not what, awaked, no sooner heard
Their first word, than sick-hearted and afeard
I grew, the cold and evil world to feel;
So hard it seemed, love, with my life to deal:
Bitterly clear I saw; as if alone
And dead, I saw the world; by a grey stone
Within the shallows, washing linen gear
They stood; their voices sounded sharp and clear;
Half smiles of pleasure and of goodlihead,
Shone on their faces, as their rough work sped;
O God, how bright the world was!"

A flush came
Across her face; as stricken by some shame
She stammered, when she went on: "Thus their speech,
Broken amid their work mine ear did reach
As I woke up to care, for the one said,
'Yea, certes, now has Kiartan good end made
Of all his troubles, things go well enow.'
'Over well,' said the other, 'didst thou know?'
'Know what?' the first one said. 'What knowst thou then?'
'Nay, nought except the certain talk of men.'
'Well, hear I not men too, what wilt thou say?'
She said, 'Men talk that this is latter May,
And Kiartan sitteth still and nought is done
For the two thefts of Bathstead to atone.'
'Fool!' saith the first one, 'shall all fall to strife
For what in no wise maketh worse their life?'
'Well, well, and what will Refna say thereto?
Things had been otherwise a while ago;
Scarce Kiartan's brother had stripped Gudrun's head
Of what she loved, and yet 'scaped lying dead
By this time. Ospak, sure, is safe enow.'
'Ah!' said the other, 'great things sayest thou!'
'True words I speak, when this I say to thee,
That glad would Gudrun and our Kiartan be
If Bodli Thorleikson and Refna lay
Dead on the earth upon the selfsame day;
And this from all men's daily talk I draw;
Old friends are last to sever, saith the saw.'

"This was the last word that I heard, O love,
For from the place softly I 'gan to move
Ere they might see me, and my feet, well taught
To know the homeward way, my body brought
Unto my bower; yet scarce I saw the way,
Rather some place beneath the sod, where lay
A few white bones, unnamed, unheeded, while
Hard by within this bower 'twixt word and smile
Was breast strained unto breast of twain I knew—
—And needs must part awhile, that I might rue
My life, my death, my bitter useless birth.
O Kiartan, over-weary seemed the earth
Yesterday and to-day; too hard to bear
Within thine home to be, and see thee near,
And think that but for very kindness thou
Must wish me dead—thou didst not note me, how
My face was worn with woe throughout that tide,
Though most men looked on me—for thou must bide
A weary waiting, and thy woe untold
Must make thy face at whiles seem hard and cold.
—Ah me! forgive me that I talk of this!
Think how my heart ached!"

For now kiss on kiss
Did Kiartan shower upon her quivering face,
Yet, even as their arms did interlace,
Despite his love and pity, of past years
He needs must think, of wasted sighs and tears
And hopes all fallen to nought, and vows undone,
And many a pleasure from his life seemed gone;
And sorely his heart smote him for her faith
So pure and changeless; her love strong as death,
As kind as God, that nought should satisfy
Till all the shows of earth had passed her by.

Kiartan fetches the price of the Coif from Bathstead.

And now a day or two with brooding face
Did Kiartan go about from place to place
And speak few words to any, till one day
He bade his men see to their war-array,
For two hours after midnight all and some
Into the hall to wait his word should come,
And whoso blabbed, he said, the deed should rue.
So thitherward in arms that night they drew;
And Refna trembling lay, while Kiartan clad
His body in the best war-gear he had,
And through the hangings did she watch the spears,
And dreadful seemed the laughter to her ears,
And red the lamps burned, as with twilight grey
They mingled: then he turned to go away,
And kissed her as he spake:
"Refna, this eve,
Most like, a noble gift shalt thou receive;
Do thou thy part to meet it with good grace,
And gather what thou canst into this place
Of fiddlers and of glee-men, and with song
Meet that good gift that comes to heal thy wrong."

Now Refna durst not ask, What wilt thou then,
And whither go to-night these all-armed men?
Because she deemed she knew what word it was
That all this clash of arms had brought to pass,
And sick at heart she grew to think thereof,
And with her fair white arms made strong by love
She clung to Kiartan, but he drew her hold
With gentle hands from off the mail rings cold,
And kissed her sweet mouth opened now to speak,
And gat him gone; and she fell back all weak
Upon her bed, and lying there alone,
Saw how his war-gear in the bright light shone,
And heard his cheery voice as he cried loud,
"To Bathstead, ho!" and then the noisy crowd
Passed clashing from the hall, and nothing there
Within a little while might Refna hear
But the dawn's noises, and the loitering tread
Of some maid getting slowly back to bed;
So there she lay alone in grief and fear,
But hope's fresh voice shuddering she needs must hear
Whispering wild words, yet sweet, of chance and crime,
Telling the wondrous ways of slowfoot time.

But now at Bathstead ere they rose that morn,
Men deemed they heard the winding of a horn,
And, running straightway to the door, could see
About the stead a goodly company,
And there were Olaf's sons with sixty men
Besetting every gate and door; but when
The men of Bathstead were all armed and went
Unto the door, they saw a gay-striped tent
Just raised upon the slope-side 'gainst the hall
And armed men round about it; one man, tall
Beyond his fellows, stood some yards more near
The hall-door, leaning on a pennoned spear,
Clad in a glittering mail-coat, with a shield
About his neck, where, on a golden field
The holy Rood of God was painted fair;
From 'neath his gilded helm his golden hair
Fell waving down, but hidden were his eyes
By the wide brim: then did great fear arise
Within their hearts, despite their fiery hate,
Because they knew that now at last, if late,
Was Kiartan's might aroused and in the field.
But none the less little would Ospak yield
To any fear; before the rest he strode,
And cried aloud:
"Within this fair abode
Has been thy place, O Kiartan Olafson,
And not without; what ill deed hast thou done
That father Oswif has forbidden thee
Thine honoured seat where it was wont to be?"

The tall man moved not, but a deep voice came
From 'neath his helm: "Thou art right wise to name
A hidden head; grow wiser! sick am I,
And somewhat deadly now to come anigh;
My sword has lost its scabbard 'gainst my will,
Beware then, for its naked edge may kill!"

Then Ospak raised the spear in his right hand
And shook it, but the tall man forth did stand
And pushed his helm aback and showed the face
Of Kiartan, and across the grassy space
Cried mightily: "Be wise, and get ye back!
Of fighting one day shall ye have small lack;
But now beware, because my father's sons
Have sworn to spare no man of you, if once
A drop of blood is spilt! Come ye not forth
Until I bid you, if of any worth
Ye hold your lives; and meantime for the sake
Of what I had and have not, I will take
My due from mead and byre."

And therewithal
He let his helm down o'er his visage fall,
And turned back toward the tent. Back shrank again,
Cowed into sullen rage, the Bathstead men,
And armed but helpless there within the hall
Silent they sat, hearkening the raiders call
The cattle o'er the meads: in high-seat there
Sat Bodli, but his visage worn with care
Of the past days, was sad, but calm and soft,
As if he thought of gentle things, though oft
Fierce eyes would scowl upon his dreamy face
Unnoted of him; in that dreary place
He seemed like some dead king, condemned in hell
For his one sin among such men to dwell
As for their wickedness he hated most
Ere righteous ways and life and all were lost.

And in meantime, 'twixt silent trembling bower
And silent cursing hall, hour after hour
Did Gudrun pace with restless feet, and heart
Betwixt two nameless miseries torn apart,
Whence cold despair was being well fashioned now.
And Oswif sat apart with wrinkled brow,
Unnoted in that house of grief and wrong.
But midst their shame, from outside, laugh and song
Came loud and louder, mingled with the clank
Of mead-horns; the feast's clamour never sank
Till mid-day was well past; then quieter
It grew without, and yet they still might hear
Lowing of neat and men's shouts. Then a voice
Cried from the slope-side:
"Bathstead men, rejoice
That ye no autumn-feast need hold this year,
For certes else should ye find victuals dear
And hard to come by! Oswif's sons, come out,
Unarmed and peaceable, and have no doubt
Of hurt from us!"
They stirred not for a space;
Then cried the voice: "Lives none within the place?
Are ye all dead of fear? Come out, I say,
Else o'er your roof the red cock crows to-day?"

Then Ospak, cursing, on the pavement cast
His shield and spear, and toward the doorway passed,
And in likewise the others one by one,
Till Bodli and Gudrun were left alone:
And then she said, "And thou—wilt thou not go?
Knowst thou the name of him who shames us so?"

"Yea, yea, I know it!" Bodli cried; "farewell!
Of me, too, shall there be a tale to tell:
I shall go forth but not without my sword."

He drew the thing he named with that last word,
And ran unto the door; against the wall
There stood the sons of Oswif, stout and tall,
Foaming, but helpless: in his saddle now
Sat Kiartan, unhelmed, his bright hair a-glow
With the May sun. His brethren stood around
Beside their horses, and a mighty sound
Came from the herd of neat that thronged the way
Beneath the hill-side; spears with pennons gay
Glittered about them in the sunlight fair,
For Kiartan's company was gathered there
Ready to set forth.
So there Bodli stood
One moment, thinking that the world was good,
Though not for him; then he cried out: "O thou,
Thou son of Olaf, come and meet me now,
For long have I been weary of the earth;
And now to me but one thing seems of worth
That I should win death of such hands as thine."

Then in the sunlight did the bright steel shine
And Kiartan's brethren soon had ended all,
For Bodli ran forth; yet heard Kiartan call
Across the clash of arms: "Nay, point nor edge
His blood shall redden not; make ye a hedge
Of your strong shields and thrust him back again,
Since he knows not that all his might is vain,
E'en to win death; live, foster-brother, yet,
And get, despite of all, what thou mayst get
Of joy and honour."
Midway, Bodli stayed,
And in his hand he poised the heavy blade
As he would cast it from him, slowly then
Did he give back face foremost from the men,
Till in the doorway once again he stood.

Then Kiartan said: "Yea, cousin, it is good,
If thou must die by me, that thou shouldst bide
Some noble fight, some glorious reaping-tide,
Where each of each fair fame at least may gain—
God grant a little bliss ere that last pain!—
But hearken, thievish sons of a wise man!
Be taught, ye blustering fools, if yet ye can!
From Yule till now I gave you, a long day,
To pay the debt that needs was ye must pay;
Twice told I take it now, and leave behind
What shall seem shame indeed to most men's mind.
—This is my bridal gift, think well of it;
In your own fields it waxed, while ye did sit
Plotting across the meadhorns. Now take heed
That oft henceforth your manhood shall ye need
If ye would live in peace. Blow loud and clear,
O horns, for Refna waiteth for us there,
And merry shall we be to-night in hall
What things soever afterwards may fall!"

Still Bodli stood with drawn sword in the door,
While midst the clang of arms and horn's loud roar
He saw the herd move up the dusty road;
He saw how Kiartan for a while abode
Behind the rest, and stared at the grey stead
Whose roof so often had been o'er his head;
He saw him turn, and well might deem he sighed,
Then muttered he, "Ah, would God I had died
By thee to-day!" and sheathed his sword, and then
Was hustled by the sullen baffled men
Who shouldered past him back into the hall,
Who heeded him just as they did the wall
Past which they rubbed; but with the last of these
He went in, casting by all hope of peace.

But Refna looking from the Herdholt knoll
That evening, saw a dust-cloud upward roll
And move toward Herdholt, and her heart beat fast
When from the midst thereof bright spear-heads passed,
And then men's helms, and then the guarded herd;
And she bethought her of her mate's last word,
And bade the women in their best array,
And minstrels, stand on either side the way
To greet the new-comers, whose horns blew loud
Close by the garth now, while the beasts 'gan crowd
About the garth-gate; so, the gate passed through,
Over the homefield toward the wall they drew,
Tended by gay-clad men-at-arms, who wore
About their helms fair flowers that Bathstead bore,
While of the beasts, sharp horn and curl-browed head,
And dewlapped neck were well begarlanded.
Then from the close loud joyful cries arose,
Tinkle of harps, sharp noise of fiddle-bows,
And all along the line there ran a shout:
Therewith old Olaf to the door came out,
And saw his sons swift from the cattle ride,
Till Kiartan leapt adown by Refna's side
And cast his arms about her, and 'gan cry:

"Now is the Queen's Gift paid for fittingly;
For these are thine, e'en as my hand and sword,
To put from thee all care, and every word
That grieves thee, sweet. O love, but I am gay!
Sure a fair life beginneth from to-day!"

She gazed at him, and knew not why her heart
Scarce in that joyous scene might play its part—
Why it was not enough—these words of love,
His bright fair face her longing eyes above.
Yet with a loving cry she hid her face
Upon his breast.
Thereat did Olaf gaze
And muttered low: "A goodly price in sooth
For a girl's coif! but yet, for Kiartan's youth,
For his fair hope and glory, and increase
Of good deeds, and mine own old age of peace,
Not too much, not too much! Ah, woe is me
That I should live these latter days to see!"

Thorhalla tells of Kiartan's Comings and Goings.

What should the next move in the strange game be?
Kiartan rode through the country carelessly
With few behind him, but nought hitherto
The sons of Oswif durst against him do,
While he his hand withheld not utterly
From them; so doubtful did the days go by.

And Gudrun? Ah, the black spot in her heart
That rose when first she knew that one had part
In Kiartan's life, and ever greater grew,
When of his love toward this new love she knew,
Now at the last, when over sure she felt
That she no longer in his memory dwelt,
O'erspread her life, till from the foiled desire
Cast back upon her heart, there sprang a fire
Of very hate: true was it, that at first
Bodli, herself, and all around she cursed
Rather than Kiartan—Well, what will you have
That was ere hope had sunk into his grave,
While yet some pleasure clung round Kiartan's name.
Then came the feast at Herdholt; then the shame
About the coif, and fear of shame again,
And many a tale told to make over plain
His love for Refna; then the evil hour,
When she within the darksome hall must cower
Amongst her trembling brethren: then, when she
Had looked at least a noble death to see,
Of one who loved her, Kiartan sent him back
A baffled man, as who all might did lack,
Yea, even the might to die; still, at each turn
Afresh this weary lesson must she learn;
With the wrong-doers hast thou taken part,
Live then, and die with them, for thy love's heart
Is now no more for thee! still everywhere
Did Kiartan's image meet her; the warm air
Of summer seemed but sent her from his hand,
The sea that beat the borders of the land
Still seemed to bear his fame unto her feet;
All summer sights and sounds, and odours sweet,
Were heavy with his memory: no least way
To 'scape from thought of him from day to day.
Withal, the sight of faces dull with hate
Of that same man, on every step did wait.
Familiar grew the muttering sullen voice
Of those who in no goodhap could rejoice,
Until the very thought and hope of strife,

The use of hate, must grow to be her life.
And shaped therefrom a dreadful longing rose,
That some fell end the weary way would close,
Unto herself she scarce durst whisper what.

Now on a day three of her brothers sat
Within the hall, and talked, and she stood by
Hearkening their eager speech most wearily.
"The gabbling crone Thorhalla has just been,"
Said Ospak; "and whom think you she has seen?"

"Nay, by thy scowl I know well," Thorolf said;
"'Twas Kiartan Olafson, upon my head."

"Well, Thorolf, thou grow'st wise—now, said the crone,
That in her life she ne'er saw such an one
As Kiartan looked; a loving maiden's dream
Of a great king, she said, the man did seem.
'Well,' said I, 'and how long then will it last?'
'Ah,' said the crone, 'till after ye are passed;
Why, the whole country-side is ringing now
With this, that ye had best be wise and bow
Before him humbly, since most kind is he;
Kind,' says the crone, 'certes he was to me.'
'Well, well,' says I, 'but these are fools' words here.'
'Nay, let me speak,' she says, 'for he will fare
Unto the west to Knoll; this know I well,
Because to him therewith I needs must tell
Of one who owed me half a mark thereby.
Well, goody, says he, I shall pass anigh,
And I will fetch it for thee—lo, how kind.'"

"Now may God strike the gabbling idiot blind!"
Said Thorolf. "Nay," said Ospak, "not so wise
Thou growest now; rather, God keep her eyes!
Tidings she told me, saying he would bide
For just three days at Knoll, and thence will ride
Through Swinedale home, close here, nor like that he
Will ride by us with a great company,
Say two at most—good luck go with his pride,
Whereby so fair a chance doth us betide!—
Bodli shall lead or die."

Then Gudrun turned
Sick-hearted from them; how her longing burned
Within her heart! ah, if he died not now,
How might she tell whereto his hate would grow?
Yet a strange hope that longing shot across,
As she got thinking what would be the loss
If Bodli fell 'neath Kiartan's hand. That day,
Like years long told, past Gudrun wore away,
She knew not how; but when the next day came
She cried aloud, "The same, ah, still the same,
Shall every day be, now that he is dead!"

She started as she heard her voice, her head
Seemed filled with flame: she crawled unto her bower
And at her mirrored face hour after hour
She stared, and wondered what she really was,
The once-loved thing o'er which his lips would pass.
Her feet grew heavy at the end of day,
Her heart grew faint, upon her bed she lay
Moveless for many an hour, until the sun
Told her that now the last day was begun;
Then she arose as one might in a dream
To clothe herself, till a great cloud did seem
To draw away from her; as in bright hell,
Sunless but shadowless she saw full well
Her life that was and would be, now she knew
The deed unmasked that summer day should do.
And then she gnashed her teeth and tore her hair,
And beat her breast, nor lightened thus despair,
As over and over the sweet names she told
Whereby he called her in the days of old;
And then she thought of Refna's longing eyes,
And to her face a dreadful smile did rise
That died amidst its birth, as back again
Her thoughts went to the tender longing pain
She once had deemed a sweet fair day would end;
And therewith such an agony did rend
Her body and soul, that all things she forgat
Amidst of it; upon the bed she sat
Rigid and stark, and deemed she shrieked, yet made
No sound indeed; but slowly now did fade
All will away from her, until the sun
Risen higher, on her moveless body shone,
And as a smitten thing beneath its stroke
She shrank and started, and awhile awoke
To hear the tramp of men about the hall.
Then did a hand upon the panel fall;
And in her very soul she heard the ring
Of weapons pulled adown, and everything,
Yea, even pain, was dead a little space.

At last she woke to see the haggard face
Of Bodli o'er her own: "I go," he said,
"Would God that thou mayst hear of me as dead
Ere the sun sets to-day."

She passed her hand
Across her eyes, as he in arms did stand
Before her there, and stared but answered not,
As though indeed his face were clean forgot;
Yet her face quickened as his eyes she saw
So full of ruth yet nigher to her draw:
She shrank aback, but therewith suddenly
A thought smote through her, with an angry cry
She sprang up from the bed, naked and white,
Her gold hair glittering in the sunshine bright
That flooded all the place; his arm she caught
And stared into his eyes:

"What is thy thought?"
She said, "why goest thou with these murderous men?
Ah! dost thou think thou yet mayst save him then?
Ah! dost thou think that thou mayst still be kind
To every one, fool as thou art and blind,
Yet work thy wicked will to pleasure thee?"

Across her passion he began to see
That now she doubted him; he muttered low:
"The work of these my hands what man can know?
And yet at least the end shall be to-day.'

She fell aback nor noted more, but lay
All huddled up upon the bed, her hair
O'er her white body scattered here and there,
And as he gazed on her he saw she wept,
And a wild passion o'er his heart there swept,
And twice he stretched his arms out, to embrace
His curse and his delight, twice turned his face
Unto the door that led unto the hall,
Then with a cry upon her did he fall
And, sobbing, strained her to his mail-clad breast,
And to her writhen lips his lips he pressed,
And moaned o'er her wet cheeks, and kissed her eyes
That knew him not; till in his heart 'gan rise,
Now at the last, a glory in his shame,
A pride to take the whole world's bitter blame;
And like a god he felt, though well he deemed
That to an end at last his dream was dreamed.
And she, she knew him not, her arms fell down
Away from him, her drawn mouth and set frown
Were not for him, she did not shrink from him,
She turned not round to curse or bless, when dim
She lay before his burning eyes once more,
Her long hair gilding the white bed-clothes o'er,
As midst low restless moaning there she tossed.
Wildly he cried: "Oh, Gudrun, thou hast lost,
But look on me for I have never won!"
Then from the place he rushed, and with the sun
Burst into the dusk hall, a stream of light,
Neath his dark hair, his face so strange and white
That a dead man dragged up into the day
By wizard's arts he seemed to be, and they
Who waited armed there, and the last cup drank,
Looked each at each, and from his presence shrank.

For there were gathered now the murderous band,
Long to be cursed thereafter through the land,
Gudrun's five brethren, and three stout men more.
Then Ospak cried, "Soon shall our shame be o'er,
And thou and we shall be great men and famed,
And Bathstead free; come now, since thou art named
Our leader, husband of Gudrun, lead forth!
For this day shall be called a day of worth,
By those that tell the story of our house."

Flushed were the men, and fierce and boisterous,
And Bodli trembled in his helpless rage
To be among them, but his sin's strong cage
Was strait and strong about him: with no word
He girt to him the rover's deadly sword,
And did his helm on: and so forth they wend
Through the bright morn to bring about the end.

The Slaying of Kiartan Olafson.

Now Kiartan rode from Knoll betimes that day,
And goodman Thorkel brought him on the way
With twelve men more, and therewithal they ride
Fast from the west, but where the pass grew wide
And opened into Swinedale, Kiartan stayed
His company, and unto Thorkel said,
"Thanks have thou, goodman, for thy following;
Now get thee back, I fear not anything
'Twixt this and Herdholt."
"Well," the goodman said,
"Time enow is there yet to be waylaid
Ere thou art safe at home; let us ride on."

"Nay," Kiartan said, "the thing shall not be done,
All men of heart will say that heart I lack,
If I must have an army at my back
Where'er I go, for fear of Oswif's sons.
Fare thee well, goodman, get thee back at once!
And therewithal take this to comfort thee,
That Bodli yet is scarce mine enemy,
And holds aback those brethren; wot ye well,
Too strange a story would it be to tell,
If these should overcome my father's son,
Besides, without thee I ride not alone."

So back the goodman turned, misdoubting though,
In spite of all how yet the day would go,
And up the dale rode Kiartan: An the Black,
The man who erst the stolen sword brought back,
Was with him there, and one named Thorarin,
As slowly now the midway dale they win.

Now, as I find it written in my tale,
There went that morn a goodman of the dale,
About those bents his mares and foals to see,
His herdsman with him; these saw presently
Up from the east the men of Bathstead ride,
And take their stand along a streamlet side
Deep sunken in a hollow, where the mouth
Of the strait pass turns somewhat to the south,
From out the dale; now, since the men they knew,
Much they misdoubted what these came to do;

But when they turned them from the sunken stream,
And saw the sun on other weapons gleam,
And three men armed come riding from the west;
And when they knew the tallest and the best
For Kiartan Olafson, therewith no more
They doubted aught.
Then said the herdsman: "Sore
The troubles are that on the country-side
Shall fall, if this same meeting shall betide;
He is a great chief; let us warn him then!"

"Yea, yea!" his master said, "and all such men
As fate leads unto death, that we may be
'Twixt the two millstones ground right merrily,
And cursed as we cry out! thou art a fool,
Who needs must be the beaker and the stool
For great men's use; emptied of joys of life
For other's joy, then kicked by in the strife
When they are drunken; come, beside the way,
Let us lie close to see the merry play!
For such a swordsman as is Kiartan, we
Shall scarce behold on this side of the sea;
And heavy odds he hath against him too.
These are great men—good, let them hack and hew
Their noble bodies for our poor delight!"

So down the bent they slipped, and as they might
Lurked by the road, and thus they tell their tale:

Ere Kiartan reached the strait place of the dale,
High up upon the brook-bank Bodli lay,
So that his helm was just seen from the way;
Then Ospak went to him, and clear they heard
Across the road his rough and threatening word:
"What dost thou here? thou hast bethought thee then
To warn thy friend that here lurk all-armed men.
Thou knowest Gudrun's mind—or knowst it not,
But knowst that we within a trap have got
Thee and the cursed wretch, the proud Mire-blade,
The Thief, the King's-pimp, the white Herdholt maid.
Come, sister's husband, get thee lower down!"

The foam flew from the lips of the fierce clown
As thus he spake, but Bodli rose and said:
"Thinkst thou I armed because I was afraid
Of thee and thine this morn? If thou knewst well
Of love or honour, somewhat might I tell
Why I am here with thee—If will I have,
Kiartan, who was my friend, this day to save,
Bethink thee I might do it otherwise
Than e'en by showing what in ambush lies!
—How if I stood beside him?"
"Down with thee
And hold thy peace! or he will hear and see."

For so it was that Kiartan drew so near
That now the herd their clinking bits might hear,
Borne down upon the light wind: on he came,
Singing an old song made in Odin's fame,
Merry and careless on that sunny morn;
When suddenly out rang the Bathstead horn,
And sharply he drew rein, and looked around;
Then did the lurkers from the gully bound
And made on toward them, and down leapt all three,
And Kiartan glanced around, and speedily
Led toward a rock that was beside the way,
And there they shifted them to stand at bay.

Most noble then looked Kiartan, said the herd,
Nor ever saw I any less afeard;
Yet, when his watchful eye on Bodli fell,
A change came o'er him, that were hard to tell,
But that he dropped his hands at first, as one
Who thinks that all is over now and done;
Yet, says the neatherd, soon his brows did clear,
And from his strong hand whistled forth his spear,
And down fell Thorolf clattering on the road.
He cried, "Down goes the thief beneath his load,
One man struck off the tale! I have heard tell
Of such as dealt with more and came off well."

Silence a space but for the mail rings; then
Over the dusty road on rushed those men;
And, says the herd, there saw I for a space
Confused gleam of swords about that place,
And from their clatter now and then did come
Sharp cry, or groan, or panting shout, as home
Went point or edge: but pale as death one stood,
With sheathed sword, looking on the clashing wood,
And that was Bodli Thorleikson. Then came
A lull a little space in that wild game.
The Bathstead men drew off, and still the three
Stood there scarce hurt as far as I could see;
But of the Bathstead men I deem some bled,
Though all stood firm; then Ospak cried and said:

"O Bodli, what thing wilt thou prophesy
For us, since like a seer thou standest by
And see'st thine house beat back? well then for thee
Will I be wise, foretelling what shall be—
A cold bed, and a shamed board, shalt thou have,
Yea, and ere many days a chased dog's grave,
If thou bringst home to-day a bloodless sword!"

But yet for all that answered he no word,
But stood as made of iron, though the breeze
Blew his long black hair round his cheek-pieces
And fanned his scarlet kirtle.

"Time we lose,"
Another cried, "if Bodli so shall choose,
Let him deal with us when this man is slain."
Then stoutly to the game they gat again
And played awhile, and now withal I saw
That rather did the sons of Oswif draw
Toward Thorarin and An, until the first,
From midst the knot of those onsetters burst,
And ran off west, followed by two stout men,
Not Oswif's sons; and An the Black fell then
Wounded to death, I deemed, but over him
Fell Gudlaug, Oswif's nephew, with a limb
Shorn off by Kiartan's sword: then once again
There came a short lull in the iron rain;
And then the four fell on him furiously
Awhile, then gave aback, and I could see
The noble Kiartan, with his mail-coat rent,
His shield hung low adown, his sword-blade bent,
Panting for breath, but still without a wound.

While as a man by some strong spell fast bound,
Without a will for aught, did Bodli stand,
Nor once cast eyes on the waylayers' band,
Nor once glanced round at Kiartan, but stared still
Upon the green side of the grassy hill
Over against him, e'en as he did deem
It yet might yawn as in a dreadful dream,
And from its bowels give some marvel birth,
That in a ghostly wise should change the earth,
And make that day nought. But as there he stood
Ospak raised up his hand, all red with blood,
And smote him on the face, and cried:
"Go home,
Half-hearted traitor, e'en as thou hast come,
And bear my blood to Gudrun!"
Still no word
Came from his pale lips, and the rover's sword
Abode within the scabbard. Ospak said,
"O lover, art thou grown too full of dread
To look him in the face whom thou fearedst not
To cozen of the fair thing he had got?
O faint-heart thief of love why drawest thou back,
When all the love thou erst so sore didst lack
With one stroke thou mayst win?"
He did not hear,
Or seemed to hear not; but now loud and clear
Kiartan cried out his name from that high place,
And at the first sound Bodli turned his face
This way and that, in puzzled hapless wise,
Till 'twixt the spears his eyes met Kiartan's eyes;
Then his mouth quivered, and he writhed aside,
And with his mail-clad hands his face did hide,
And trembled like one palsy-struck, while high
Over the doubtful field did Kiartan cry:

"Yea, they are right! be not so hardly moved,
O kinsman, foster-brother, friend beloved
Of the old days, friend well forgiven now!
Come nigher, come, that thou my face mayst know,
Then draw thy sword and thrust from off the earth
The fool that so hath spoilt thy days of mirth,
Win long lone days of love by Gudrun's side!
My life is spoilt, why longer do I bide
To vex thee, friend?—strike then for happy life!
I said thou mightst not gaze upon the strife
Far off; bethink thee then, who sits at home
And waits thee, Gudrun, mine own love, and come,
Come, for the midday sun is over bright,
And I am wearying for the restful night!"

And now had Bodli dropped his hands adown,
And shown his face all drawn into a frown
Of doubt and shame; his hand was on his sword,
Even ere Kiartan spake that latest word;
Still trembling, now he drew it from its sheath,
And the bright sun ran down the fated death,
And e'en the sons of Oswif shuddered now,
As with wild eyes and heavy steps and slow
He turned toward Kiartan; beat the heart in me
Till I might scarce breathe, for I looked to see
A dreadful game; the wind of that midday
Beat 'gainst the hill-sides; a hound far away
Barked by some homestead's door; the grey ewe's bleat
Sounded nearby; but that dull sound of feet,
And the thin tinkling of the mail-coat rings
Drowned in my ears the sound of other things,
As less and less the space betwixt them grew;
I shut my eyes as one the end who knew,
But straight, perforce, I opened them again
Woe worth the while!
As one who looks in vain
For help, looked Kiartan round; then raised his shield,
And poised his sword as though he ne'er would yield
E'en when the earth was sinking; yet a while,
And o'er his face there came a quivering smile,
As into Bodli's dreadful face he gazed;
Then my heart sank within me, as all dazed,
I saw the flash of swords that never met,
And heard how Kiartan cried:
"Ah, better yet
For me to die than live on even so!
Alas! friend, do the deed that thou must do!
Oh, lonely death!—farewell, farewell, farewell!"

And clattering on the road his weapons fell,
And almost ere they touched the bloody dust,
Into his shieldless side the sword was thrust,
And I, who could not turn my eyes away,
Beheld him fall, and shrieked as there I lay,
And yet none noted me; but Bodli flung
Himself upon the earth, and o'er him hung,

Then raised his head, and laid it on his knee,
And cried:
"Alas! what have I done to thee?
Was it for this deed, then, that I was born?
Was this the end I looked for on this morn?
I said, To-day I die, to-day I die,
And folk will say, an ill deed, certainly,
He did, but living had small joy of it,
And quickly from him did his weak life flit—
Where was thy noble sword I looked to take
Here in my breast, and die for Gudrun's sake,
And for thy sake—O friend, am I forgot?
Speak yet a word!"
But Kiartan answered not,
And Bodli said, "Wilt thou not then forgive?
Think of the days I yet may have to live
Of hard life!"
Therewith Kiartan oped his eyes,
And strove to turn about as if to rise,
And could not, but gazed hard on Bodli's face,
And gasped out, as his eyes began to glaze:

"Farewell, thou joyous life beneath the sun,
Thou foolish wasted gift—farewell, Gudrun!"
And then on Bodli's breast back fell his head,
He strove to take his hand, and he was dead.

Then was there silence a long while, well-nigh
We heard each other breathe, till quietly
At last the slayer from the slain arose,
And took his sword, and sheathed it, and to those
Four sons of Oswif, e'en as one he spake
Who had good right the rule o'er them to take:

"Here have we laid to earth a mighty one,
And therein no great deed, forsooth, have done,
Since his great heart o'ercame him, not my sword;
And what hereafter may be our reward
For this, I know not: he that lieth here
By many a man in life was held right dear,
As well as by the man who was his friend,
And brought his life and love to bitter end;
And since I am the leader of this band
Of man-slayers, do after my command.
Go ye to Bathstead, name me everywhere
The slayer of Kiartan Olafson, send here
Folk who shall bear the body to our stead;
And then let each man of you hide his head,
For ye shall find it hard from this ill day
To keep your lives: here, meanwhile, will I stay,
Nor think myself yet utterly alone."

Then home turned Oswif's sons, and they being gone,
We slunk away, and looking from the hill
We saw how Bodli Thorleikson stood still
In that same place, nor yet had faced the slain.
And so we gat unto our place again.

So told the herd, time long agone, the tale
Of that sad fight within the grey-sloped vale.

Kiartan brought dead to Bathstead.

Men say that those who went the corpse to bring
To Bathstead thence, found Bodli muttering
Over the white face turned up to the sky,
Nor did he heed them as they drew anigh,
Therefore they stood by him, and heard him say:

"Perchance it is that thou art far away
From us already; caring nought at all
For what in after days to us may fall—
—O piteous, piteous!—yet perchance it is
That thou, though entering on thy life of bliss,
The meed of thy great heart, yet art anear,
And somewhat of my feeble voice canst hear;
Then scarce for pardon will I pray thee, friend,
Since thus our love is brought unto no end,
But rather now, indeed, begins anew;
Yet since a long time past nought good or true
My lips might utter, let me speak to thee,
If so it really is that thou art free,
At peace and happy past the golden gate;
That time is dead for thee, and thou mayst wait
A thousand years for her and deem it nought.
O dead friend, in my heart there springs a thought
That, since with thy last breath thou spak'st her name,
And since thou knowest now how longing came
Into my soul, thou wilt forgive me yet
That time of times, when in my heart first met
Anger against thee, with the sweet sweet love
Wherewith my old dull life of habit strove
So weakly and so vainly—didst thou quite
Know all the value of that dear delight
As I did? Kiartan, she is changed to thee;
Yea, and since hope is dead changed too to me,
What shall we do, if, each of each forgiven,
We three shall meet at last in that fair heaven
The new faith tells of? Thee and God I pray
Impute it not for sin to me to-day,
If no thought I can shape thereof but this:
O friend, O friend, when thee I meet in bliss,
Wilt thou not give my love Gudrun to me,
Since now indeed thine eyes made clear can see
That I of all the world must love her most?"

Then his voice sank so that his words were lost
A little while; then once again he spake,
As one who from a lovesome dream doth wake:

"Alas! I speak of heaven who am in hell!
I speak of change of days, who know full well
How hopeless now is change from misery:
I speak of time destroyed, when unto me

Shall the world's minutes be as lapse of years;
I speak of love who know how my life bears
The bitter hate which I must face to-day—
I speak of thee, and know thee passed away,
Ne'er to come back to help or pity me."

Therewith he looked up, and those folk did see,
And rose up to his feet, and with strange eyes
That seemed to see nought, slunk in shamefast wise,
Silent, behind them, as the corpse they laid
Upon the bier; then, all things being arrayed,
Back unto Bathstead did they wend once more,
As mournful as though dead with them they bore
The heart of Iceland; and yet folk must gaze
With awe and pity upon Bodli's face,
And deem they never might such eyes forget.
But when they reached the stead, anigh sunset,
There in the porch a tall black figure stood,
Whose stern pale face, 'neath its o'erhanging hood,
In the porch shadow was all cold and grey,
Though on her feet the dying sunlight lay.
They trembled then at what might come to pass,
For that grey face the face of Gudrun was,
And they had heard her raving through the day
As through the hall they passed; then made they stay
A few yards from the threshold, and in dread
Waited what next should follow; but she said,
In a low voice and hoarse:

"Nay, enter here,
Without, this eve is too much change and stir,
And rest is good,—is good, if one might win
A moment's rest; and now none is within
The hall but Oswif: not much will he speak,
And as for me—behold, I am grown weak!
I cannot vex him much."

She stepped aside,
And the dark shade her raiment black did hide
As they passed through into the dusky hall,
Afraid to see her face, and last of all
Went Bodli, clashing through the porch, but he
Stayed in the midst, and turned round silently,
And sought her face and said:

"Thy will is done.
Is it enough? Art thou enough alone
As I am?"

Never any word she spake.
No hate was in her face now: "For thy sake
I did it, Gudrun. Speak one word to me
Before my bitter shame and misery
Crushes my heart to death."

She reached a hand
Out toward the place where trembling he did stand
But touched him not, and never did he know
If she had mind some pity then to show
Unto him, or if rather more apart
She fain had thrust him from her raging heart:
For now those men came tramping from the hall,
And Bodli shrank aback unto the wall
To let them pass, and when the last was gone,
In the dim twilight there he stood alone,
Nor durst he follow her, but listened there,
Half-dead, and but his breathing might he hear,
And the faint noises of the gathering night.
He stood so long that the moon cast her light
In through the porch, and still no sound he heard
But the faint clink of mail-rings as he stirred.
"Ah, she is dead of grief, or else would she
Have come to say some little word to me,
Since I so love her, love her!"

With a wail
He cried these words, and in the moonlight pale,
Clashing he turned: but e'en therewith a shriek
From out the dead hush of the hall did break,
And then came footsteps hurrying to the porch,
And the red flare of a new-litten torch,
And smit by nameless horror and affright
He fled away into the moonlit night.

What Folk did at Herdholt after the Slaying.

Now in the hall next morn did Oswif bide
The while his messengers went far and wide
Asking for help; and all in hiding lay
Whose hapless hands had brought about that day,
Save Bodli; but for him, when back he came
That morn, affrighted, Oswif called his name,
Beholding him so worn and changed, and said:

"Stout art thou, kinsman, not to hide thine head!
Yet think that Olaf is a mighty man,
And though thy coming life look ill and wan—
Good reason why—Yet will I ask of thee
The staff of mine old age at least to be,
And save thy life therefor."

Then Bodli smiled
A ghastly smile: "Nay, I am not beguiled
To hope for speedy death; is it not told
How that Cain lived till he was very old?"

Therewith he sank adown into a seat
And hid his face. But sound of hurrying feet
Was in the porch withal; and presently
Came one who said:

"Oswif, all hail to thee!
From Holyfell I come with tidings true,
That little will the wily Snorri do
To help us herein; for he saith the deed
Is most ill done, and that thy sons shall need
More help than they shall get within the land;

Yet saith withal, he will not hold his hand
From buying peace, if that may serve thy turn."

"Well, well," said Oswif, "scarce now first I learn
That Snorri bides his time, and will not run
His neck into a noose for any one.
Go, get thee food, good fellow. Whence com'st thou?
Who followest, for thy face is long enow?"

"The bearer of a message back I am
From Whiteriver, where Audun Festargram
Has well-nigh done his lading, and, saith he,
That so it is he feareth the deep sea
But little, and the devil nought at all;
But he is liefer at hell's gate to call
With better men than are thy sons, he saith."

"Good," Oswif said, "that little he fears death!
My sight clears, and I see his black bows strike
The hidden skerry. But thou next; belike
Thou hast ill tidings too: what saith my friend,
The son of Hauskuld? what shall be the end?"

"Oswif," the man said, "be not wroth with me
If unto Herdholt nowise openly
I went last night; I fared with hidden head
E'en as a man who drifts from stead to stead
When things go ill: so shelter there I gat,
And mid the house-carles long enow I sat
To note men's bearing. Olaf—an old man
He looks now truly—sat all worn and wan
Within the high-seat, and I deemed of him
That he had wept, from his red eyes and dim,
That scarce looked dry as yet; but down the board
Sat Thorgerd, and I saw a naked sword
Gleam from her mantle; round her sat her sons,
And unto Haldor did she whisper once
And looked toward Olaf; Haldor from its sheath
Half drew his sword, and then below his breath
Spake somewhat. Now looked Olaf round the hall,
But when his eyes on Kiartan's place did fall
His mouth twitched, though his eyes gazed steadily;
He set his hand unto a beaker nigh
And drank and cried out:
'Drink now all of you
Unto the best man Iceland ever knew!
Son, I am weary that thou hast not come
With gleesome tales this eve unto my home;
Yet well thou farest surely amid those
Who are the noblest there, and not so close
They sit, but there is room for thee beside;
Sure, too, with them this eve is merry tide
That thou art come amongst them—would that I
O son, O son, were of that company!'

"With outstretched hand and fixed eyes did he stare,
As though none other in the hall there were
But him he named; the while mid shout and clank
All folk unto the man departed drank,
And midst the noise, withal, I saw no few,
Who from their sheaths the glittering weapons drew,
And through the talk of Kiartan's deeds I heard,
Not lowly spoken, many a threatening word;
While with the tumult of the clattering place
So gathered white-hot rage in Thorgerd's face,
That long it held her silent: then I saw
A black form from the women's chamber draw
White-faced, white-handed; ever did she gaze
Upon the hall-door with an anxious face,
And once or twice as the stout door-planks shook
Beneath the wind's stroke, a half-hopeful look
Came o'er her face, that faded presently
In anguish, as she looked some face to see
Come from the night, and then remembered all;
And therewith did great ruth upon me fall,
For this was Refna; and most quietly
She passed to Olaf's side, and with a sigh
Sat down beside him there; now and again
An eager look lit up her patient pain
As from the home-men Kiartan's name came loud,
And then once more her heavy head she bowed,
And strove to weep and might not. In a while
She raised her eyes, and met grey Thorgerd's smile
Scornful and fierce, who therewithal rose up
And laid her hand upon a silver cup,
And drew from out her cloak a jewelled sword,
And cast it ringing on the oaken board,
And o'er the hall's noise high her clear voice shrilled:

"'If the old gods by Christ and mass are killed,
Or driven away, yet am I left behind,
Daughter of Egil, and with such a mind
As Egil had; whereof if Asa Thor
Has never lived, and there are men no more
Within the land, yet by this king's gift here,
And by this cup Thor owned once, do I swear
That the false foster-brother shall be slain
Before three summers have come round again,
If but my hand must bring him to his end.'

"Therewith a stern shout did her tall sons send
Across the hall, and mighty din arose
Among the home-men. Refna shrank all close
To Olaf's side; but he at first said nought,
Until the cries and clash of weapons brought
Across his dream some image of past days;
And, turning, upon Refna did he gaze,
And on her soft hair laid his hand, and then
Faced round upon the drink-flushed clamorous men,

And in a mighty voice cried out and said :
'Forbear, ye brawlers ! now is Kiartan dead,
Nor shall I live long. Will it bring him back
To let loose on the country war and wrack,
And slay the man I love next after him?
Leave me in peace at least ! mine eyes wax dim,
And little pleasure henceforth shall I have,
Until my head hath rest within the grave.'

"Then did he rise and stretch across the board,
And took into his hand the noble sword,
And said, 'In good will wert thou given, O blade,
But not to save my son's heart wert thou made.
Help no man henceforth ! harm no man henceforth !
Thou foolish glittering toy of little worth ! '

"Therewith he brake the sword across his knee,
And cast it down ; and then I minded me
How the dead man there bore not that fair blade
When unto grass of Swinedale he was laid.
But Olaf looked so great a man, that none
Durst say a word against him. 'Gone is gone,'
He said, 'nor yet on Bodli shall ye fall.
When all is ready, Kiartan's voice shall call
For him he loved ; but if it must be so,
Then unto Oswif's base sons shall ye show
That him they did to death left friends behind ;
For this thing ever shall ye bear in mind,
That through their vile plots did all come to pass,
And Bodli but the sword they fought with was.'
"And therewithal he sat down wearily,
And once again belike saw nought anigh.

"Well, Oswif, little more there happed that eve,
And I at dawn to-day their stead did leave,
To tell thee how things went."
Now Bodli heard
The man speak, and some heart in him was stirred
When of the woman's oath was told, but when
The tale was ended, his head sank again
With a low moan ; but Oswif said :
"Yea, true
Did my heart tell me, when I thought I knew
The nobleness of Olaf Hauskuldson.
What shall be done now?"
As he spake came one
Panting and flushed into the hall, and cried :
"Get to your arms in haste ; Herdholt doth ride
Unto our stead in goodly company ! "
Then was there tumult as was like to be,
And round the silent face of the dead man,
Hither and thither, half-armed tremblers ran
With poor hearts ; but old Oswif to the door
Went forth unarmed, and Bodli scarce moved more
Than his dead foster-brother. Soon withal
Did quiet on the troubled homestead fall,
For there was nought come but a peaceful train
To bring back Kiartan to his home again ;

And there upon the green slope did they bide,
Whence Kiartan on that other morn had cried
His scorn aloud ; wherefrom were six men sent,
Who, entering now the thronged hall, slowly went,
Looking around them, toward the bier ; but as
They drew anear it, from the bower did pass
A black-clad figure, and they stood aghast,
For it was Gudrun, and wild eyes she cast
On this and that man, as if questioning
Mutely the meaning of some dreadful thing
She knew was doing there : her black gown's hem
She caught up wildly as she gazed at them,
Then shuddering cast it down, and seemed to seek
The face of Oswif ; then as if to shriek
She raised her head, and clenched her hands, but
nought
Of sound from out her parched lips was there
brought,
Till at her breast she clutched, and rent adown
With trembling hands the bosom of her gown,
And cried out, panting as for lack of air :

"Alas, what do ye? have ye come to bear
My love a second time from me, O men?
Do ye not know he is come back again
After a long time? Ah, but evil heart
Must be in you such love as ours to part ! "

Then, crying out, upon the corpse she fell,
And men's hearts failed them for pure ruth, and
well
They deemed it, might she never rise again ;
But strong are many hearts to bear all pain
And live, and hers was even such an one.
Softly they bore her back amidst her swoon ;
And then, while even men must weep, once more
Did Kiartan pass the threshold of the door,
That once had been the gate of Paradise
Unto his longing heart. But in nowise
Did Bodli move amidst all this, until
Slow wound the Herdholt men around the hill ;
Then stealthily his white face did he raise,
And turned about unto the empty place
Where erst the bier had stood ; then he arose,
And looked into the faces of all those
Who stood around, as asking what betid,
What dreadful thing the quivering silence hid ;
And then he staggered back unto the wall,
And such a storm of grief on him did fall,
With sobs, and tears, and inarticulate cries,
That men for shame must turn away their eyes,
Nor seem to see a great man fallen so low.

With such wild songs home to the stead came
now
The last load of that bitter harvesting,
That from the seed of lust and lies did spring.

Gudrun's Deeming of the Men who loved her.

Thus have I striven to show the troublous life
Of these dead folk, e'en as if mid their strife
I dwelt myself; but now is Kiartan slain;
Bodli's blank yearning, Gudrun's wearying pain,
Shall change but little now unto the end;
And midst a many thoughts home must I wend,
And in the ancient days abide no more.
Yet, when the shipman draweth nigh the shore,
And slacks the sheet and lets adown the sail
Scarce suddenly therewith all way doth fail
The sea-clasped keel. So with this history
It fareth now; have patience then with me
A moment yet, ere all the tale is told.

While Olaf Peacock lived, his sons did hold
Their hands from Bodli; Oswif's sons must pay
With gold and outlawry for that ill day,
And nothing else there happened to them worse
Than o'er the sea to bear all people's curse,
Nor know men aught more of their history.
Three winters afterward did Olaf die,
Full both of years and honour; then was not
Thorgerd's fierce oath amidst her sons forgot;
The golden ring, whose end old Guest foresaw,
Worn through the weary years with many a flaw,
Now smitten, fell asunder: Bodli died
Manlike amidst his foes, with none beside
To sorrow o'er him, scarcely loth maybe
The end of his warped life at last to see.

Turn back a while; of her I have to tell,
Whose sorrow on my heart the more doth dwell,
That nought she did to earn it, as I deem—
—Unto the Ridge, where on the willowy stream
Her father's stead looks down, did Refna go,
That, if it might be, she some rest might know
Within the fair vale where she wandered, when
The bearded faces of the weaponed men
Were wonders to her child's eyes, far away
The wild thoughts of their hearts; her little day
Of hope and joy gone by, there yet awhile
She wandered once again; nor her faint smile
Would she withhold, when pitying eyes did gaze
On the deep sorrow of her lovely face;
For she belike felt strong, and still might deem
That life, all turned into a longing dream,
Would long abide with her—happier she was,
But little time over her head did pass,
Before all smiles from off her face did fade,
And in the grave her yearning heart was laid,
No more now to be rent 'twixt hope and fear,
No more to sicken with the dull despair.

Yet is she left to tell of, some might call,
The very cause the very curse of all;
And yet not I—for after Bodli's death
Too dreadful grew the dale, my story saith,
For Gudrun longer at her house to dwell,
Wherefore with Snorri, lord of Holyfell,
Did she change steads. There dwelt she a long space,
And true it is, that in her noble face
Men deemed but little signs of woe they saw;
And still she lived on long, and in great awe
And honour was she held, nor unfulfilled
Was the last thing that Guest deemed fate had willed
Should fall on her: when Bodli's sons were men
And many things had happed, she wed again,
And though her days of keen joys might be bare
Yet little did they bring of added care
As on and on they wore from that old time
When she was set amidst mad love and crime,

Yet went this husband's end no otherwise
Than Guest foresaw: at last with dreamy eyes
And weary heart from his grave too she turned
Across the waste of life on one hand burned
The unforgotten sore regretted days
Long left behind; and o'er the stony ways
Her feet must pass yet, the grey cloud of death
Rolled doubtful, drawing nigher. The tale saith
That she lived long years afterwards, and strove,
E'en as she might, to win a little love
From God now, and with bitter yearning prayer
Through these slow-footed lonely days to wear.
And men say, as to all the ways of earth
Her soul grew blind, and other hopes had birth
Within her, that her bodily sight failed too,
And now no more the dark from day she knew.

This one more picture gives the ancient book
On which I pray you for a while to look,
If for your tears ye may. For it doth tell
That on a day she sat at Holyfell
Within the bower, another Bodli there
Beside her, son of him who wrought her care;
A travelled man and mighty, gay of weed,
Doer belike of many a desperate deed
Within the huge wall of the Grecian king.
A summer eve it was, and everything
Was calm and fair, the tinkling bells did sound
From the fair chapel on the higher ground
Of the holy hill, the murmur of the sea
Came on the fitful south-west soothingly;
The house-carles sang as homeward now they went
From out the home-field, and the hay's sweet scent
Floated around: and when the sun had died
An hour agone now, Bodli stirred and sighed;
Perchance too clearly felt he life slip by

Amid those pensive things, and certainly
He too was past his youth.
"Mother," he said,
"Awhile agone it came into my head
To ask thee somewhat; thou hast loved me well,
And this perchance is no great thing to tell
To one who loves thee."
With her sightless eyes
Turned on him did she smile in loving wise,
But answered nought; then he went on, and said:
"Which of the men thou knewest—who are dead
Long ago, mother,—didst thou love the best?"
Then her thin hands each upon each she pressed,
And her face quivered, as some memory
Were hard upon her:
"Ah, son! years go by.
When we are young this year we call the worst
That we can know; this bitter day is cursed,
No more such days our hearts can bear, we say.
But yet as time from us falls fast away
There comes a day, son, when all this is fair
And sweet, to what, still living, we must bear—
Bettered is bale by bale that follows it,
The saw saith."
Silent both awhile did sit
Until she spake again: "Easy to tell
About them, son, my memory serves me well:
A great chief Thorkel was, bounteous and wise,
And ill hap seemed his death in all men's eyes.
Bodli thy sire was mighty of his hands,
Scarce better dwelt in all the northern lands;
Thou wouldst have loved him well. My husband Thord
Was a great man; wise at the council-board,
Well learned in law—for Thorwald, he indeed,
A rash weak heart, like to a stinging weed
Must be pulled up—ah, that was long ago!"
Then Bodli smiled, "Thou wouldst not have me know
Thy thought, O mother—these things know I well;
Old folk about these men e'en such tales tell."

She said, "Alas, O son, thou ask'st of love!
Long folly lasteth; still that word doth move
My old worn heart—hearken one little word,
Then ask no more; ill is it to be stirred
To vain repining for the vanished days."

She turned, until her sightless eyes did gaze
As though the wall, the hills, must melt away,
And show her Herdholt in the twilight grey;
She cried, with tremulous voice, and eyes grown wet
For the last time, whate'er should happen yet,
With hands stretched out for all that she had lost:

"I did the worst to him I loved the most."

THEY too, those old men, well might sit and gaze
Upon the images of bygone days,
And wonder mid their soft self-pity, why
Mid such wild struggles had their lives gone by,
Since neither love nor joy, nor even pain,
Should last for ever; yet their strife so vain
While still they strove, so sore regretted now,
The heavy grief that once their heads did bow,
Had wrought so much for them, that they might sit
Amid some pleasure at the thought of it;
At least not quite consumed by sordid fear,
That now at last the end was come anear;
At least not hardened quite so much, but they
Might hear of love and longing worn away
'Twixt birth and death of others, wondering
Belike, amid their pity, what strange thing
Made the mere truth of what poor souls did bear
—In vain or not in vain—so sweet to hear,
So healing to the tangled woes of earth,
At least for a short while.
But little mirth
The grey eve and the strong unfailing wind
Might ask of them that tide; and yet behind
That mask of pensive eyes, so unbeguiled
By ancient folly any more, what wild
Strange flickering hopes ineffable might lie,
As swift that latter end of eve slipped by!

DECEMBER.

DEAD lonely night and all streets quiet now,
Thin o'er the moon the hindmost cloud swims past
Of that great rack that brought us up the snow;
On earth strange shadows o'er the snow are cast;
Pale stars, bright moon, swift cloud make heaven so vast
That earth left silent by the wind of night
Seems shrunken 'neath the grey unmeasured height.

Ah! through the hush the looked-for midnight clangs!
And then, e'en while its last stroke's solemn drone
In the cold air by unlit windows hangs,
Out break the bells above the year foredone,
Change, kindness lost, love left unloved alone;
Till their despairing sweetness makes thee deem
Thou once wert loved, if but amidst a dream.

O thou who clingest still to life and love,
Though nought of good, no God thou mayst discern,
Though nought that is, thine utmost woe can move,
Though no soul knows wherewith thine heart doth yearn,
Yet, since thy weary lips no curse can learn,
Cast no least thing thou lovedst once away,
Since yet perchance thine eyes shall see the day.

DECEMBER came, with mirth men needs must make
E'en for the empty days and leisure's sake
That earth's cold leaden sleep doth bring; so there
Our elders sat within the guest-hall fair,
Not looking older for the snow without;
Cheery enough; remembering not old doubt,
A gnawing pain once, grown too hard to bear,
And so cast by; not thinking of old fear,
That conquering once, e en with its victory
Must fade away, and, like all things else, die.
Not thinking of much else than that they had
Enough of life to make them somewhat glad
When all went well with them.

Now so it fell
That mariners were there, who 'gan to tell
Mishaps betid upon the winter seas,
Which set some younger men amidst of these
To ask the Wanderers of their voyage vain,
As knowing scarce the tale thereof. Small pain
It gave them now to answer: yet belike
On the old men, their hosts, the thing did strike
In jarring wise, this turning o'er and o'er
Of memories once so bitter sharp and sore:
Wherefore at last an elder said, "Let be,
My masters! if about the troublous sea
Ye needs must hear, hearken a tale once told
By kin of ours in the dim days of old,
Whose thoughts when turning to a peaceful home
Unto this very west of ours must come—
—Scarce causelessly meseems when all is said,
And I remember that years bow my head,
And not the trouble of those days of war,
Of loss and wrong that in old stories are."

THE GOLDEN APPLES.

ARGUMENT.

This tale tells of the voyage of a ship of Tyre, that, against the will of the shipmen, bore Hercules to an unknown land of the West, that he might accomplish a task laid on him by the Fates.

AS many as the leaves fall from the tree,
From the world's life the years are fallen away
Since King Eurystheus sat in majesty
In fair Mycenæ; midmost of whose day
It once befell that in a quiet bay
A ship of Tyre was swinging nigh the shore,
Her folk for sailing handling rope and oar.

Fresh was the summer morn, a soft wind stole
Down from the sheep-browsed slopes the cliffs that crowned,
And ruffled lightly the long gleaming roll
Of the peaceful sea, and bore along the sound
Of shepherd-folk and sheep and questing hound;
For in the first dip of the hillside there
Lay bosomed 'midst its trees a homestead fair.

Amid regrets for last night, when the moon,
Risen on the soft dusk, shone on maidens' feet
Brushing the gold-heart lilies to the tune
Of pipes complaining, o'er the grass down-beat
That mixed with dewy flowers its odour sweet,
The shipmen laboured, till the sail unfurled
Swung round the prow to meet another world.

But ere the anchor had come home, a shout
Rang from the strand, as though the ship were hailed.
Whereat the master bade them stay, in doubt
That they without some needful thing had sailed;
When, lo! from where the cliffs' steep grey sides failed
Into a ragged stony slip, came twain
Who seemed in haste the ready keel to gain.

Soon they drew nigh, and he who first came down
Unto the surf was a man huge of limb,
Grey-eyed, with crisp-curled hair 'twixt black and brown,
Who had a lion's skin cast over him,
So wrought with gold that the fell showed but dim
Betwixt the threads, and in his hand he bore
A mighty club with bands of steel done o'er.

Panting there followed him a grey old man,
Bearing a long staff, clad in gown of blue,
Feeble of aspect, hollow-cheeked and wan,
Who when unto his fellow's side he drew,
Said faintly: "Now, do that which thou shouldst do;
This is the ship." Then in the other's eye
A smile gleamed, and he spake out merrily:

"Masters, folk tell me that ye make for Tyre,
And after that still nearer to the sun;
And since Fate bids me look to die by fire,
Fain am I, ere my worldly day be done,
To know what from earth's hottest can be won;
And this old man, my kinsman, would with me.
How say ye, will ye bear us o'er the sea?"

"What is thy name?" the master said: "And know
That we are merchants, and for nought give nought;
What wilt thou pay?—thou seem'st full rich, I trow."
The old man muttered, stooped adown and caught
At something in the sand: "E'en so I thought,"
The younger said, "when I set out from home—
As to my name, perchance in days to come

"Thou shalt know that—but have heed, take this toy,
And call me the Strong Man." And as he spake
The master's deep-brown eyes 'gan gleam with joy,
For from his arm a huge ring did he take,
And cast it on the deck, where it did break
A water-jar, and in the wet shards lay
Golden, and gleaming like the end of day.

But the old man held out a withered hand,
Wherein there shone two pearls most great and fair,
And said, "If any nigher I might stand,

Then might'st thou see the things I give thee here—
And for my name—a many names I bear;
But call me Shepherd of the Shore this tide,
And for more knowledge with a good will bide."

From one to other turned the master's eyes;
The Strong Man laughed as at some hidden jest,
And wild doubts in the shipman's heart did rise;
But thinking on the thing, he deemed it best
To bid them come aboard, and take such rest
As they might have of the untrusty sea,
'Mid men who trusty fellows still should be.

Then no more words the Strong Man made, but straight
Caught up the elder in his arms, and so,
Making no whit of all that added weight,
Strode to the ship, right through the breakers low,
And catching at the rope that they did throw
Out toward his hand, swung up into the ship:
Then did the master let the hawser slip.

The shapely prow cleft the wet mead and green,
And wondering drew the shipmen round to gaze
Upon those limbs, the mightiest ever seen;
And many deemed it no light thing to face
The splendour of his eyen, though they did blaze
With no wrath now, no hate for them to dread,
As seaward 'twixt the summer isles they sped.

Freshened the wind, but ever fair it blew
Unto the south-east; but as failed the land,
Unto the plunging prow the Strong Man drew,
And silent, gazing with wide eyes did stand,
As though his heart found rest; but 'mid the band
Of shipmen in the stern the old man sat,
Telling them tales that no man there forgat.

As one who had beheld, he told them there
Of the sweet singer, whom, for his song's sake,
The dolphins back from choking death did bear;
How in the mid sea did the vine outbreak
O'er that ill bark when Bacchus 'gan to wake;
How anigh Cyprus, ruddy with the rose
The cold sea grew as any June-loved close;

While on the flowery shore all things alive
Grew faint with sense of birth of some delight,
And the nymphs waited trembling there, to give
Glad welcome to the glory of that sight:
He paused then, ere he told how, wild and white,
Rose ocean, breaking o'er a race accurst,
A world once good, now come unto its worst.

And then he smiled, and said, "And yet ye won,
Ye men, and tremble not on days like these,
Nor think with what a mind Prometheus' son
Beheld the last of the torn reeling trees
From high Parnassus: slipping through the seas
Ye never think, ye men-folk, how ye seem
From down below through the green waters' gleam."

Dusk was it now when these last words he said,
And little of his visage might they see,
But o'er their hearts stole vague and troublous dread,
They knew not why; yet ever quietly
They sailed that night; nor might a morning be
Fairer than was the next morn; and they went
Along their due course after their intent.

The fourth day, about sunrise, from the mast
The watch cried out he saw Phœnician land;
Whereat the Strong Man on the elder cast
A look askance, and he straight took his stand
Anigh the prow, and gazed beneath his hand
Upon the low sun and the scarce-seen shore,
Till cloud-flecks rose, and gathered and drew o'er.

The morn grown cold; then small rain 'gan to fall,
And all the wind dropped dead, and hearts of men
Sank, and their bark seemed helpless now and small,
Then suddenly the wind 'gan moan again;
Sails flapped, and ropes beat wild about; and then
Down came the great east wind; and the ship ran
Straining, heeled o'er, through seas all changed and wan.

Westward, scarce knowing night from day, they drave
Through sea and sky grown one; the Strong Man wrought
With mighty hands, and seemed a god to save;
But on the prow, heeding all weather nought,
The elder stood, nor any prop he sought,
But swayed to the ship's wallowing, as on wings
He there were set above the wrack of things.

And westward still they drave; and if they saw
Land upon either side, as on they sped,
'Twas but as faces in a dream may draw
Anigh, and fade, and leave nought in their stead;
And in the shipmen's hearts grew heavy dread
To sick despair; they deemed they should drive on
Till the world's edge and empty space were won.

But 'neath the Strong Man's eyes e'en as they might
They toiled on still; and he sang to the wind,
And spread his arms to meet the waters white,

As o'er the deck they tumbled, making blind
The brine-drenched shipmen; nor with eye unkind
He gazed up at the lightning; nor would frown
When o'er the wet waste Jove's bolt rattled down.

And they, who at the last had come to think
Their guests were very gods, with all their fear
Feared nought belike that their good ship would sink
Amid the storm; but rather looked to hear
The last moan of the wind that them should bear
Into the wildless stream of ocean grey,
Where they should float till dead was every day.

Yet their fear mocked them; for the storm 'gan die
About the tenth day, though unto the west
They drave on still; soon fair and quietly
The morn would break; and though amid their rest
Nought but long evil wandering seemed the best
That they might hope for; still, despite their dread,
Sweet was the quiet sea and goodlihead

Of the bright sun at last come back again;
And as the days passed, less and less fear grew,
If without cause, till faded all their pain;
And they 'gan turn unto their guests anew,
Yet durst ask nought of what that evil drew
Upon their heads; or of returning speak.
Happy they felt, but listless, spent, and weak.

And now as at the first the elder was,
And sat and told them tales of yore agone;
But still the Strong Man up and down would pass
About the deck, or on the prow alone
Would stand and stare out westward; and still on
Through a fair summer sea they went, nor thought
Of what would come when these days turned to nought.

And now when twenty days were well passed o'er
They made a new land; cloudy mountains high
Rose from the sea at first; then a green shore
Spread fair below them: as they drew anigh
No sloping stony strand could they espy,
And no surf breaking; the green sea and wide
Wherethrough they slipped was driven by no tide.

Dark fell ere they might set their eager feet
Upon the shore; but night-long their ship lay
As in a deep stream, by the blossoms sweet
That flecked the grass whence flowers ne'er passed away,
But when the cloud-barred east brought back the day,
And turned the western mountain-tops to gold,
Fresh fear the shipmen in their bark did hold.

For as a dream seemed all; too fair for those
Who needs must die; moreover they could see,
A furlong off, 'twixt apple tree and rose,
A brazen wall that gleamed out wondrously
In the young sun, and seemed right long to be;
And memory of all marvels lay upon
Their shrinking hearts now this sweet place was won.

But when unto the nameless guests they turned,
Who stood together nigh the plank shot out
Shoreward, within the Strong Man's eyes there burned
A wild light, as the other one in doubt
He eyed a moment; then with a great shout
Leaped into the blossomed grass; the echoes rolled
Back from the hills, harsh still and over-bold.

Slowly the old man followed him, and still
The crew held back: they knew now they were brought
Over the sea the purpose to fulfil
Of these strange men; and in their hearts they thought,
"Perchance we yet shall live, if, meddling nought
With dreams, we bide here till these twain come back;
But prying eyes the fire-blast seldom lack."

Yet 'mongst them were two fellows bold and young,
Who, looking each upon the other's face,
Their hearts to meet the unknown danger strung,
And went ashore, and at a gentle pace
Followed the strangers, who unto the place
Where the wall gleamed had turned; peace and desire
Mingled together in their hearts, as nigher

They drew unto that wall, and dulled their fear:
Fair wrought it was, as though with bricks of brass;
And images upon its face there were,
Stories of things a long while come to pass:
Nor that alone—as looking in a glass
Its maker knew the tales of what should be,
And wrought them there for bird and beast to see.

So on they went; the many birds sang sweet
Through all that blossomed thicket from above,
And unknown flowers bent down before their feet;
The very air, cleft by the grey-winged dove,
Throbbed with sweet scent, and smote their souls with love.
Slowly they went till those twain stayed before
A strangely-wrought and iron-covered door,

They stayed, too, till o'er noise of wind, and bird,
And falling flower, there rang a mighty shout
As the Strong Man his steel-bound club upreared,
And drave it 'gainst the hammered iron stout,
Where 'neath his blows flew bolt and rivet out,
Till shattered on the ground the great door lay,
And into the guarded place bright poured the day.

The Strong Man entered, but his fellow stayed,
Leaning against a tree-trunk as they deemed.
They faltered now, and yet all things being weighed
Went on again; and thought they must have dreamed
Of the old man, for now the sunlight streamed
Full on the tree he had been leaning on,
And him they saw not go, yet was he gone:

Only a slim green lizard flitted there
Amidst the dry leaves; him they noted nought,
But trembling, through the doorway 'gan to peer,
And still of strange and dreadful saw not aught,
Only a garden fair beyond all thought.
And there, 'twixt sun and shade, the Strong Man went
On some long sought-for end belike intent.

They 'gan to follow down a narrow way
Of green-sward that the lilies trembled o'er,
And whereon thick the scattered rose-leaves lay;
But a great wonder weighed upon them sore,
And well they thought they should return no more;
Yet scarce a pain that seemed; they looked to meet
Before they died things strange and fair and sweet.

So still to right and left the Strong Man thrust
The blossomed boughs, and passed on steadily,
As though his hardy heart he well did trust,
Till in a while he gave a joyous cry,
And hastened on, as though the end drew nigh;
And women's voices then they deemed they heard,
Mixed with a noise that made desire afeard.

Yet through sweet scents and sounds on did they bear
Their panting hearts, till the path ended now
In a wide space of green, a streamlet clear
From out a marble basin there did flow,
And close by that a slim-trunked tree did grow,
And on a bough low o'er the water cold
There hung three apples of red-gleaming gold.

About the tree, new risen e'en now to meet
The shining presence of that mighty one,
Three damsels stood, naked from head to feet
Save for the glory of their hair, where sun
And shadow flickered, while the wind did run
Through the grey leaves o'erhead, and shook the grass
Where nigh their feet the wandering bee did pass.

But 'midst their delicate limbs and all around
The tree-roots, gleaming blue black could they see
The spires of a great serpent, that, enwound
About the smooth bole, looked forth threateningly,
With glittering eyes and raised crest, o'er the three
Fair heads fresh crowned, and hissed above the speech
Wherewith they murmured softly each to each.

Now the Strong Man amid the green space stayed
And, leaning on his club, with eager eyes
But brow yet smooth, in voice yet friendly said:
"O daughters of old Hesperus the Wise,
Well have ye held your guard here; but time tries
The very will of gods, and to my hand
Must give this day the gold fruit of your land."

Then spake the first maid—sweet as the west wind
Amidst of summer noon her sweet voice was:
"Ah, me! what knows this place of changing mind
Of men or gods; here shall long ages pass,
And clean forget thy feet upon the grass,
Thy hapless bones amid the fruitful mould;
Look at thy death, envenomed, swift and cold!"

Hiding new flowers, the dull coils, as she spake,
Moved near her limbs: but then the second one,
In such a voice as when the morn doth wake
To songs of birds, said, "When the world fore-done
Has moaned its last, still shall we dwell alone
Beneath this bough, and have no tales to tell
Of things deemed great that on the earth befell."

Then spake the third, in voice as of the flute
That wakes the maiden to her wedding morn:
"If any god should gain our golden fruit,
Its curse would make his deathless life forlorn.
Lament thou, then, that ever thou wert born;
Yet all things, changed by joy or loss or pain,
To what they were shall change and change again."

"So be it," he said, "the Fates that drive me on
Shall slay me or shall save; blessing or curse
That followeth after when the thing is won
Shall make my work no better now nor worse;
And if it be that the world's heart must nurse
Hatred against me, how then shall I choose
To leave or take?—let your dread servant loose!"

E'en therewith, like a pillar of black smoke,
Swift, shifting ever, drave the worm at him;
In deadly silence now that nothing broke,
Its folds were writhing round him trunk and limb,
Until his glittering gear was nought but dim
E'en in that sunshine, while his head and side
And breast the fork-tongued, pointed muzzle tried.

Closer the coils drew, quicker all about
The forked tongue darted, and yet stiff he stood,
E'en as an oak that sees the straw flare out
And lick its ancient bole for little good:
Until the godlike fury of his mood
Burst from his heart in one great shattering cry,
And rattling down the loosened coils did lie;

And from the torn throat and crushed dreadful head
Forth flowed a stream of blood along the grass;
Bright in the sun he stood above the dead,
Panting with fury; yet as ever was
The wont of him, soon did his anger pass,
And with a happy smile at last he turned
To where the apples o'er the water burned.

Silent and moveless ever stood the three;
No change came o'er their faces, as his hand
Was stretched aloft unto the sacred tree;
Nor shrank they aught aback, though he did stand
So close that tresses of their bright hair, fanned
By the sweet garden breeze, lay light on him,
And his gold fell brushed by them breast and limb.

He drew adown the wind-stirred bough, and took
The apples thence; then let it spring away,
And from his brow the dark hair backward shook,
And said: "O sweet, O fair, and shall this day
A curse upon my life henceforward lay—
This day alone? Methinks of coming life
Somewhat I know, with all its loss and strife.

"But this I know, at least: the world shall wend
Upon its way, and, gathering joy and grief
And deeds done, bear them with it to the end;
So shall it, though I lie as last year's leaf
Lies 'neath a summer tree, at least receive
My life gone by, and store it, with the gain
That men alive call striving, wrong, and pain.

"So for my part I rather bless than curse,
And bless this fateful land; good be with it;
Nor for this deadly thing's death is it worse,
Nor for the lack of gold; still shall ye sit
Watching the swallow o'er the daisies flit;
Still shall your wandering limbs ere day is done
Make dawn desired by the sinking sun.

"And now, behold! in memory of all this
Take ye this girdle that shall waste and fade
As fadeth not your fairness and your bliss;
That when hereafter 'mid the blossoms laid
Ye talk of days and men now nothing made,
Ye may remember how the Theban man,
The son of Jove, came o'er the waters wan.'

Their faces changed not aught for all they heard,
As though all things now fully told out were,
They gazed upon him without any word:
Ah! craving kindness, hope, or loving care,
Their fairness scarcely could have made more fair,
As with the apples folded in his fell
He went, to do more deeds for folk to tell.

Now as the girdle on the ground was cast
Those fellows turned and hurried toward the door,
And as across its broken leaves they passed
The old man saw they not, e'en as before;
But an unearthed blind mole bewildered sore
Was wandering there in fruitless, aimless wise,
That got small heed from their full-sated eyes.

Swift gat they to their anxious folk; nor had
More time than just to say, "Be of good cheer,
For in our own land may we yet be glad,"
When they beheld the guests a-drawing near;
And much bewildered the two fellows were
To see the old man, and must even deem
That they should see things stranger than a dream.

But when they were aboard, the elder cried,
"Up sails, my masters, fair now is the wind;
Nor good it is too long here to abide,
Lest what ye may not loose your souls should bind."
And as he spake, the tall trees left behind
Stirred with the rising land-wind, and the crew,
Joyous thereat, the hawsers shipward drew.

Swift sped the ship, and glad at heart were all,
And the Strong Man was merry with the rest,
And from the elder's lips no word did fall
That did not seem to promise all the best;
Yet with a certain awe were men oppressed,
And felt as if their inmost hearts were bare,
And each man's secret babbled through the air.

Still oft the old man sat with them and told
Tales of past time, as on the outward way;
And now would they the face of him behold
And deem it changed; the years that on him lay
Seem to grow nought, and no more wan and grey
He looked, but ever glorious, wise and strong,
As though no lapse of time for him were long.

At last, when six days through the kindly sea
Their keel had slipped, he said: "Come hearken now,
For so it is that things fare wondrously
E'en in these days; and I a tale can show
That, told by you unto your sons shall grow
A marvel of the days that are to come:
Take heed and tell it when ye reach your home.

"Yet living in the world a man there is
Men call the Theban King Amphitryon's son,
Although perchance a greater sire was his;
But certainly his lips have hung upon
Alcmena's breasts: great deeds this man hath won
Already; for his name is Hercules,
And e'en ye Asian folk have heard of these.

"Now ere the moon, this eve in his last wane,
Was born, this Hercules, the fated thrall
Of King Eurystheus, was straight bid to gain
Gifts from a land whereon no foot doth fall
Of mortal man, beyond the misty wall
Of unknown waters; pensively he went
Along the sea on his hard life intent.

"And at the dawn he came into a bay
Where the sea, ebbed far down, left wastes of sand,
Walled from the green earth by great cliffs and grey;
Then he looked up, and wondering there did stand,
For strange things lay in slumber on the strand;
Strange counterparts of what the firm earth hath
Lay scattered all about his weary path:

"Sea-lions and sea-horses and sea-kine,
Sea-boars, sea-men strange-skinned, of wondrous hair;
And in their midst a man who seemed divine
For changeless eld, and round him women fair,
Clad in the sea-webs glassy green and clear
With gems on head and girdle, limb and breast,
Such as earth knoweth not among her best.

"A moment at the fair and wondrous sight
He stared, then, since the heart in him was good,
He went about with careful steps and light
Till o'er the sleeping sea-god now he stood;
And if the white-foot maids had stirred his blood
As he passed by, now other thoughts had place
Within his heart when he beheld that face.

"For Nereus now he knew, who knows all things;
And to himself he said, 'If I prevail,
Better than by some god-wrought eagle-wings
Shall I be holpen;' then he cried out: 'Hail,
O Nereus! lord of shifting hill and dale!
Arise and wrestle; I am Hercules!
Not soon now shalt thou meet the ridgy seas.'

"And mightily he cast himself on him;
And Nereus cried out shrilly; and straightway
That sleeping crowd, fair maid with half-hid limb,
Strange man and green-haired beast, made no delay,
But glided down into the billows grey,
And, by the lovely sea embraced, were gone,
While they two wrestled on the sea strand lone.

"Soon found the sea-god that his bodily might
Was nought in dealing with Jove's dear one there;
And soon he 'gan to use his magic sleight:
Into a lithe leopard, and a hugging bear
He turned him; then the smallest fowl of air
The straining arms of Hercules must hold,
And then a mud-born wriggling eel and cold.

"Then as the firm hands mastered this, forth brake
A sudden rush of waters all around,
Blinding and choking: then a thin green snake
With golden eyes; then o'er the shell-strewn ground
Forth stole a fly the least that may be found;
Then earth and heaven seemed wrapped in one huge flame,
But from the midst thereof a voice there came:

"'Kinsman and stout-heart, thou hast won the day,
Nor to my grief: what wouldst thou have of me?'
And therewith to an old man small and grey
Faded the roaring flame, who wearily
Sat down upon the sand and said, 'Let be!
I know thy tale; worthy of help thou art;
Come now, a short way hence will there depart

"'A ship of Tyre for the warm southern seas,
Come we a-board; according to my will
Her way shall be.' Then up rose Hercules,
Merry of face, though hot and panting still;
But the fair summer day his heart did fill
With all delight; and so forth went the twain,
And found those men desirous of all gain.

"Ah, for these gainful men—somewhat indeed
Their sails are rent, their bark beat; kin and friend
Are wearying for them; yet a friend in need
They yet shall gain, if at their journey's end,
Upon the last ness where the wild goats wend
To lick the salt-washed stones, a house they raise
Bedight with gold in kindly Nereus' praise."

Breathless they waited for these latest words,
That like the soft wind of the gathering night
Were grown to be: about the masts flew birds
Making their moan, hovering long-winged and white;
And now before their straining anxious sight
The old man faded out into the air,
And from his place flew forth a sea-mew fair.

Then to the Mighty Man, Alcmena's son,
With yearning hearts they turned till he should speak,
And he spake softly: "Nought ill have ye done
In helping me to find what I did seek:
The world made better by me knows if weak
My hand and heart are: but now, light the fire
Upon the prow and worship the grey sire."

So did they; and such gifts as there they had
Gave unto Nereus; yea, and sooth to say,
Amid the tumult of their hearts made glad,
Had honoured Hercules in e'en such way;
But he laughed out amid them, and said, "Nay,
Not yet the end is come; nor have I yet
Bowed down before vain longing and regret.

"It may be—who shall tell, when I go back
There whence I came, and looking down behold
The place that my once eager heart shall lack,
And all my dead desires a-lying cold,
But I may have the might then to enfold
The hopes of brave men in my heart?—but long
Life lies before first with its change and wrong."

So fair along the watery ways they sped
In happy wise, nor failed of their return;
Nor failed in ancient Tyre the ways to tread,
Teaching their tale to whomsoe'er would learn,
Nor failed at last the flesh of beasts to burn
In Nereus' house, turned toward the bright day's end
On the last ness, round which the wild goats wend.

He made an end, and gazed about the place,
With rest enow upon his ancient face,
And smiling; but to some the tale did seem
Like to the middle of some pleasant dream,
Which, waked from, leaves upon the troubled mind
A sense of something ill that lurked behind,
If morn had given due time to dream it out.

Yet as the women stirred, and went about
The board with flask and beaker, and the scent
Of their soft raiment 'mid the feasters went,
The hill-side sun of autumn-tide at least
Seemed to come back unto their winter feast;
Rest, half remembering time past, did they win,
And somewhat surely wrought the tale therein.

In late December shone the westering sun
Through frosty haze of the day nearly done,
Without the hall wherein our elders were:
Within, the firelight gleamed on raiment fair,
And heads far fairer; because youth and maid
Midwinter words of hope that day had said
Before the altars; and were come at last,
No worse for snowy footways over-past,
Or for the east wind upon cheek and brow,
Their fairness to the ancient folk to show;
And, dance and song being done, at end of day,
With ears pricked up, amid the furs they lay,
To have reward of tale for sound and sight
So given erewhile.

The flickering firelight,
And the late sun still streaming through the haze,
Made the hall meet enow for tale of days
So long passed over: nigh the cheery flame
A wanderer sat, and a long sunbeam came
On to his knees, then to the hearth fell down.
There in the silence, with thin hands and brown
Folded together, and a dying smile
Upon his face, he sat a little while,
Then somewhat raised his bright eyes, and began
To name his people's best beloved man.

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG.

ARGUMENT.

Aslaug, the daughter of Sigurd who slew the dragon, and of Brynhild whom he loved, lost all her friends and kin, and was nourished amid great misery; yet in the end her fortune, her glory, and her beauty prevailed, and she came to mighty estate.

A FAIR tale might I tell to you
Of Sigurd, who the dragon slew
Upon the murder-wasted heath,
And how love led him unto death,
Through strange wild ways of joy and pain;
Then such a story should ye gain,
If I could tell it all aright,
As well might win you some delight
From out the woefullest of days;
But now have I no heart to raise
That mighty sorrow laid asleep,
That love so sweet, so strong and deep
That as ye hear the wonder told
In those few strenuous words of old,
The whole world seems to rend apart
When heart is torn away from heart.
But the world lives still, and to-day
The green Rhine wendeth on its way
Over the unseen golden curse
That drew its lords to worse and worse
Till that last dawn in Atli's hall,
When the red flame flared over all,
Lighting the leaden, sunless sea.

Yet so much told of this must be,
That Sigurd, while his youth was bright
And unstained, 'midst the first delight
Of Brynhild's love—that him did gain
All joy, all woe, and very bane—
Begat on her a woman-child.
In hope she bore the maid, and smiled
When of its father's face she thought;
But when sad time the change had brought,
And she to Gunnar's house must go,
She, thinking how she might bestow
The memory of that lovely eve,
That morn o'er-sweet, the child did leave
With Heimir, her old foster-sire,
A mighty lord; then, with the fire
Of her old love still smouldering,
And brooding over many a thing,
She went unto her life and death.
Nought, as I said, the story saith
Of all the wrong and love that led
Her feet astray: together dead
They lie now on their funeral pile,
And now the little one doth smile
Upon the glittering war-array
Of the men come the sooth to say
To Heimir of that bitter end.

Silent he stared till these did wend
Into the hall to fire and board,
Then by the porch without a word
Long time he sat: then he arose
And drew his sword, and hard and close
Gazed on the thin-worn edge, and said:
"Smooth cheeks, sweet hands, and art thou dead?
O me thy glory! Woe is me!
I thought once more thine eyes to see—
Had I been young three years agone,
When thou a maiden burd-alone,
Hadst eighteen summers!"
As he spake,
He gat him swiftly to the brake
Of thorn-trees nigh his house: and some,
When calm once more he sat at home,
Deemed he had wept: but no word more
He spake thereof.
A few days wore,
And now alone he oft would be
Within his smithy; heedfully
He guarded it, that none came in;
Nor marvelled men; "For he doth win
Some work of craftsmanship," said they,
"And such before on many a day
Hath been his wont."

So it went on
That a long while he wrought alone;
But on the tenth day bore in there
Aslaug, the little maiden fair,
Three winters old; and then the thing
A little set folk marvelling;
Yet none the less in nought durst they
To watch him. So to end of day
Time drew, and still unto the hall
He came not, and a dread 'gan fall
Upon his household, lest some ill
The quiet of their lives should kill;
And so it fell that the next morn
They found them of their lord forlorn,
And Aslaug might they see no more;
Wide open was the smithy door,
The forge a-cold, and hammering tools
Lay on the floor, with woodwright's rules,
And chips and shavings of hard wood.
Moreover, when they deemed it good
To seek for him, nought might they do,
The tale says, for so dark it grew
Over all ways, that no man might
Know the green meads from water white.
So back they wended sorrowfully,
And still most like it seemed to be,
That Odin had called Heimir home;
And nothing strange it seemed to some
That with him the sweet youngling was,
Since Brynhild's love might bring to pass
E'en mightier things than this, they said;
And sure the little gold-curled head,
The pledge of all her earthly weal,
In Freyia's house she longed to feel.

Further the way was than they deemed
Unto that rest whereof they dreamed
Both to the greybeard and the child;
For now by trodden way and wild
Goes Heimir long: wide-faced is he,
Thin-cheeked, hook-nosed, e'en as might be
An ancient erne; his hair falls down
From 'neath a wide slouched hat of brown,
And mingles white with his white beard;
A broad brown brand, most men have feared,
Hangs by his side, and at his back
Is slung a huge harp, that doth lack
All fairness certes, and so great
It is, that few might bear its weight;
Yea, Heimir even, somewhat slow
Beneath its burden walketh now,
And looketh round, and stayeth soon.

On a calm sunny afternoon,
Within a cleared space of a wood,
At last the huge old warrior stood
And peered about him doubtfully;
Who, when nought living he might see,
But mid the beech-boughs high aloft
A blue-winged jay, and squirrel soft,
And in the grass a watchful hare,
Unslung his harp and knelt down there
Beside it, and a little while
Handled the hollow with a smile
Of cunning, and behold, the thing
Opened, as by some secret spring,
And there within the hollow lay,
Clad in gold-fringed well-wrought array,
Aslaug, the golden-headed child,
Asleep and rosy; but she smiled
As Heimir's brown hand drew a-near,
And woke up free from any fear,
And stretched her hands out towards his face.
He sat him down in the green place,
With kind arms round the little one,
Till, fully waked now, to the sun
She turned, and babbling, 'gainst his breast
Her dimpled struggling hands she pressed:
His old lips touched those eyes of hers,
That Sigurd's hope and Brynhild's tears
Made sad e'en in her life's first spring;
Then sweet her chuckling laugh did ring,
As down amid the flowery grass
He set her, and beheld her pass
From flower to flower in utter glee;
Therewith he reached out thoughtfully,
And cast his arms around the harp,
That at the first most strange and sharp
Rang through the still day, and the child
Stopped, startled by that music wild:
But then a change came o'er the strings,
As, tinkling sweet, of merry things
They seemed to tell, and to and fro
Danced Aslaug, till the tune did grow
Fuller and stronger, sweeter still,
And all the woodland place did fill
With sound, not merry now nor sad,
But sweet, heart-raising, as it had
The gathered voice of that fair day
Amidst its measured strains; her play
Amid the flowers grew slower now,
And sadder did the music grow,
And yet still sweeter: and with that,
Nigher to where the old man sat
Aslaug 'gan move, until at last
All sound from the strained strings there passed
As into each other's eyes they gazed;
Then, sighing, the young thing he raised,
And set her softly on his knee,
And laid her round cheek pitifully
Unto his own, and said:
"Indeed,
Of such as I shalt thou have need,
As swift the troubled days wear by,

And yet I know full certainly
My life on earth shall not be long:
And those who think to better wrong
By working wrong, shall seek thee wide
To slay thee; yea, belike they ride
E'en now unto my once-loved home.
Well, to a void place shall they come,
And I for thee thus much have wrought—
For thee and Brynhild—yea, and nought
I deem it still to turn my face
Each morn unto some unknown place
Like a poor churl—for, ah! who knows
Upon what wandering wind that blows
Drives Brynhild's spirit through the air;
And now by such road may I fare
That we may meet ere many days."

Again the youngling did he raise
Unto his face, for to the earth
Had she slipped down; her babbling mirth
Had mingled with his low deep speech;
But now, as she her hand did reach
Unto his beard, nor stinted more
Her babble, did a change come o'er
His face; for through the windless day
Afar a mighty horn bid bray;
Then from beneath his cloak he drew
A golden phial, and set it to
Her ruddy lips in haste, and she
Gazed at him awhile fearfully,
As though she knew he was afraid;
But silently the child he laid
In the harp's hollow place, for now
Drowsy and drooping did she grow
'Neath the strong potion; hastily
He shut the harp, and raised it high
Upon his shoulder, set his sword
Ready to hand, and with no word
Stalked off along the forest glade;
But muttered presently:
"Afraid
Is a strange word for me to say;
But all is changed in a short day,
And full of death the world seems grown.
Mayhap I shall be left alone
When all are dead beside, to dream
Of happy life that once did seem
So stirring 'midst the folk I loved.
Ah! is there nought that may be moved
By strong desire? yea, nought that rules
The very Gods who thrust earth's fools,
This way and that as foolishly,
For aught I know thereof, as I
Deal with the chess when I am drunk?"

His head upon his breast was sunk
For a long space, and then again
He spake: "My life is on the wane;
Somewhat of this I yet may learn
Ere long; yet I am fain to earn
My rest by reaching Atli's land;
For surely 'neath his mighty hand
Safe from the Niblungs shall she be,
Safe from the forge of misery,
Grimhild the Wise-wife."
As a goad
That name was to him; on he strode
Still swifter, silent. But day wore
As fast between the tree-stems hoar
He went his ways; belike it was
That he scarce knew if he did pass
O'er rough or smooth, by dark or light,
Until at last the very night
Had closed round him as thinner grew
The wood that he was hurrying through;
And as he gained a grey hill's brow
He felt the sea-breeze meet him now,
And heard the low surf's measured beat
Upon the beach. He stayed his feet,
And through the dusky gathering dark
Peered round and saw what seemed a spark
Along the hill's ridge; thitherward
He turned, still warily on guard,
Until he came unto the door
Of some stead, lone belike and poor:
There knocking, was he bidden in,
And heedfully he raised the pin,
And entering stood with blinking gaze
Before a fire's unsteady blaze.

There sat a woman all alone
Whom some ten years would make a crone,
Yet would they little worsen her;
Her face was sorely pinched with care,
Sour and thin-lipped she was; of hue
E'en like a duck's foot; whitish blue
Her eyes were, seeming as they kept
Wide open even when she slept.
She rose up, and was no less great
Than a tall man, a thing of weight
Was the gaunt hand that held a torch
As Heimir, midmost of the porch,
Fixed his deep grey and solemn eyes
Upon that wretched wife's surprise.

"Well," said she, "what may be your will?
Little we have your sack to fill,
If on thieves' errand ye are come;
But since the goodman is from home
I know of none shall say you nay
If ye have will to bear away
The goodwife."
As on a burned house
Grown cold, the moon shines dolorous

From out the rainy lift, so now
A laugh must crease her lip and brow.

"I am no thief, goodwife," he said,
"But ask wherein to lay my head
To-night."
"Well, goodman, sit," said she:
"Thine ugly box of minstrelsy
With thine attire befits not ill;
And both belike may match thy skill."

So by the fire he sat him down,
And she too sat, and coarse and brown
The thread was that her rock gave forth
As there she spun; of little worth
Was all the gear that hall did hold.
Now Heimir new-come from the cold
Had set his harp down by his side,
And, turning his grey eyes and wide
Away from hers, slouched down his hat
Yet farther o'er his brows, and sat
With hands outstretched unto the flame.
But had he noted how there came
A twinkle into her dead eyes,
He had been minded to arise,
Methinks; for better company
The wild-wood wolf had been than she
Because, from out the hodden grey
That was the great man's poor array,
Once and again could she behold
How that the gleam of ruddy gold
Came forth: so therewith she arose,
And, wandering round the hall, drew close
Unto the great harp, and could see
Some fringe of golden bravery
Hanging therefrom.—And the man too,
In spite of patch and clouted shoe,
And unadorned sword, seemed indeed
Scarce less than a great king in need,
So wholly noble was his mien.
So, with these things thus thought and seen,
Within her mind grew fell intent
As to and fro the hall she went,
And from the ark at last did take
Meal forth for porridge and for cake,
And to the fire she turned, and 'gan
To look still closer on the man
As with the girdle and the pot
She busied her, and doubted not
That on his arm a gold ring was;
For presently, as she did pass,
Somewhat she brushed the cloak from him,
And saw the gold gleam nowise dim.
Then sure, if man might shape his fate,
Her greed impatient and dull hate
Within her eyes he might have seen,
And so this tale have never been.

But nought he heeded; far away
His thoughts were.
Therewith did she lay
The meal upon the board, and said,
"Meseems ye would be well apaid
Of meat and drink, and it is here,
Fair lord—though somewhat sorry cheer;
Fall to now."
Whining, with a grin
She watched, as one who sets a gin,
If at the name of lord at all
He started, but no speech did fall
From his old lips, and wearily
He gat to meat, and she stood by,
And poured the drink to him, and said:

"To such a husband am I wed
That ill is speech with him, when he
Comes home foredone with drudgery;
And though indeed I deem thee one
Who deeds of fame full oft hath done
And would not fear him, yet most ill
'Twould be the bliss of us to spill
In brawl with him, as might betide
If thou his coming shouldst abide.
Our barley barn is close hereby,
Wherein a weary man might lie
And be no worse at dawn of day."

"Well, goodwife," said he, "lead the way!
Worse lodging have I had than that,
Where the wolf howled unto the bat,
And red the woodland stream did run."

She started back; he seemed as one
Who might have come back from the dead,
To wreak upon her evil head
Her sour ill life; but nought the more
He heeded her: "Go on before,"
He said, "for I am in no case
To-night to meet an angry face
And hold my hand from my good sword

So out she passed without a word,
Though when he took in careful wise
The heavy harp, with greedy eyes
And an ill scowl she gazed thereon,
Yet durst say nought. But soon they won
Unto the barn's door—he turned round,
And, gazing down the rugged ground,
Beheld the sea wide reaching, white
Beneath the new-risen moon, and bright
His face waxed for a little while,
And on the still night did he smile,
As into the dark place he went,—
And saw no more of the grey bent,
Or sea, or sky, or morrow's sun.

Unless perchance when all is done,
And all the wrongs the gods have wrought
Come utterly with them to nought,
New heavens and earth he shall behold,
And peaceful folk, and days of gold,
When Baldur is come back again
O'er an undying world to reign.

For when the carl came home that night,
In every ill wise that she might,
She egged him on their guest to slay
As sleeping in the barn he lay;
And, since the man was no ill mate
For her, and heedless evil fate
Had made him big and strong enow,
He plucked up heart to strike the blow
Though but a coward thief he was.
So at the grey dawn did he pass
Unto the barn, and entered there;
But through its dusk therewith did hear
The sound of harp-strings tinkling: then,
As is the wont of such-like men,
Great fear of ghosts fell on his heart;
Yet, trembling sore, he thrust apart
The long stems of the barley-straw,
And, peering round about, he saw
Heimir asleep, his naked brand
Laid o'er his knees, but his right hand
Amid the harp-strings, whence there came
A mournful tinkling; and some name
His lips seemed muttering, and withal
A strange sound on his ears did fall
As of a young child murmuring low
The muffled sounds of passing woe.
Nought dreadful saw he; yet the hair
Gan bristle on his head with fear,
And twice was he at point to turn
His bread by other craft to earn;
But in the end prevailed in him
His raging greed 'gainst glimmerings dim
Of awe and pity; which but wrought
In such wise in him that he thought
How good it were if all were done,
And day, and noise, and the bright sun
Were come again: he crept along,
Poising a spear, thick shafted, strong,
In his right hand; and ever fast
His heart beat as the floor he passed,
And o'er his shoulder gazed for fear
Once and again; he raised the spear,
As Heimir's hand the string still pressed,
And thrust it through his noble breast,
Then turned and fled, and heard behind
A sound as of a wildered wind,
Half moan, half sigh; then all was still.
But yet such fear his soul did fill
That he stayed not until he came
Into the hall, and cried the name
Of his wife, Grima, in high voice.

"Ah well," she said, "what needs this noise?
Can ye not see me here?—Well then?"

"Wife," said he, "of the sons of men
I deem him not, rather belike
Odin it was that I did strike."

She laughed an ill laugh. "Well," she said,
"What then, if only he be dead?"

"What if he only seemed to die?"
He said, "and when night draweth nigh
Shall come again grown twice as great,
And eat where yesternight he ate?
For certes, wife, that harp of his,
No earthly minstrelsy it is,
Since as in sleep the man was laid
Of its own self a tune it played;
Yea, yea, and in a man's voice cried;
Belike a troll therein doth bide."

"An ugly, ill-made minstrel's tool,"
She said; "thou blundering, faint-heart fool!
Some wind moaned through the barn belike,
And the man's hand the strings did strike."

And yet she shivered as she spake,
As though some fear her heart did take,
And neither durst to draw anigh
The barn until the sun was high,
Then in they went together, and saw
The old man lying in the straw,
Scarce otherwise than if asleep,
Though in his heart the spear lay deep,
And round about the floor was red.
Then Grima went, and from the dead
Stripped off the gold ring, while the man
Stood still apart; then she began
To touch the harp, but in no wise
Might open it to reach the prize.
Wherefore she bade her husband bring
Edge-tools to split the cursed thing.
He brought them trembling, and the twain
Fell to, and soon their end did gain;
But shrank back trembling to see there
The youngling, her grey eyes and clear
Wide open, fearless; but the wife
Knew too much of her own sour life
To fear the other world o'ermuch,
And soon began to pull and touch
The golden raiment of the may;
And at the last took heart to say:

"Be comforted! we shall not die;
For no work is this certainly

Wrought in the country never seen,
But raiment of a Hunnish queen—
Gold seest thou, goodman! gems seest thou!—
No ill work hast thou wrought I trow.
But, for the maiden, we must give
Victuals to her that she may live;
For though to-day she is indeed
But one more mouth for us to feed,
Yet as she waxeth shall she do
Right many a thing to help us two;
Yea, whatso hardest work there is,
That shall be hers—no life of bliss
Like sewing gold mid bower-mays;
She shall be strong, too, as the days
Increase on her."
Then said the man:
"Get speech from her, for sure she can
Tell somewhat of her life and state."

But whatso he or his vile mate
Might do, no word at all she spake
Either for threat or promise sake;
Until at last they deemed that she
Was tongue-tied: so now presently
Unto the homestead was she brought,
And her array all golden-wrought
Stripped from her, and in rags of grey
Clad was she. But from light of day
The carl hid Heimir dead, and all
Into dull sodden life did fall.

So with the twain abode the may,
Waxing in beauty day by day
But ever as one tongue-tied was,
What thing soever came to pass;
And needs the hag must call her Crow:
"A name," she said, "full good enow
For thee—my mother bore it erst."
So lived the child that she was nursed
On little meat and plenteous blows;
Yet nowise would she weep, but close
Would set her teeth thereat, and go
About what work she had to do,
And ever wrought most sturdily;
Until at last she grew to be
More than a child. And now the place
That once had borne so dull a face
Grew well-nigh bright to look upon,
And whatso thing might shine there shone;
Yea, all but her who brought about
That change therein—for, past all doubt,
Years bettered in nowise our hag,
And ever she said that any rag
Was good enough to clothe the Crow.
And still her hate did grow and grow
As Aslaug grew to womanhood;
Oft would she sit in murderous mood
Long hours, with hand anigh a knife,
As Aslaug slept, all hate at strife
With greed within her; yet withal
Something like fear of her did fall
Upon her heart, and heavy weighed
That awful beauty, that oft stayed
Her hand from closing on the hilt,
E'en more than thought of good things spilt.
Hard words and blows this scarce might stay,
For like the minutes of the day,
Not looked for, noted not when gone,
Were all such things unto the crone,
And, smitten or unsmitten, still
The Crow was swift to work her will.

In spring-tide of her seventeenth year,
On the hill-side the house anear
Went Aslaug, following up her goats:
On such a day as when Love floats
Through the soft air unseen, to touch
Our hearts with longings overmuch
Unshapen into hopes, to make
All things seem fairer for the sake
Of that which cometh, who doth bear
Who knows how much of grief and fear
In his fair arms. So Aslaug went,
On vague and unnamed thoughts intent,
That seemed to her full sweet enow,
And ever greater hope did grow,
And sweet seemed life to her and good,
Small reason why: into the wood
She turned, and wandered slim and fair
'Twixt the dark tree-boles: strange and rare
The sight was of her golden head,
So good, uncoifed, unchapleted,
Above her sordid dark array,
That over her fair body lay
As dark clouds on a lilied hill.
The wild things well might gaze their fill,
As through the wind-flowers brushed her feet,
As her lips smiled when those did meet
The lush cold blue-bells, or were set
Light on the pale dog-violet
Late April bears; the red-throat jay
Screamed not for nought, as on her way
She went, light-laughing at some thought;
If the dove moaned 'twas not for nought,
Since she was gone too soon from him,
And e'en the sight he had was dim
For the thick budding twigs. At last
Into an open space she passed,
Nigh filled with a wide, shallow lake,
Amidmost which the fowl did take
Their pastime; o'er the firmer grass,
'Twixt rushy ooze, swift did she pass,

Until upon a bank of sand
Close to the water did she stand,
And gazed down in that windless place
Upon the image of her face,
And as she gazed laughed musically
Once and again; nor heeded she
Her straying flock: her voice, that none
Had heard since Heimir was undone
Within that wretched stead, began
Such speech as well had made a man
Forget his land and kin to make
Those sweet lips tremble for his sake:

"Spring bringeth love," she said, "to all.
She sighed as those sweet sounds did fall
From her unkissed lips: "Ah," said she,
"How came that sweet word unto me,
Among such wretched folk who dwell;
Folk who still seem to carry hell
About with them?—That ancient man
They slew, with whom my life began,
I deem he must have taught me that,
And how the steel-clad maiden sat
Asleep within the ring of flame,
Asleep, and waiting till Love came,
Who was my father: many a dream
I dream thereof, till it doth seem
That they will fetch me hence one day.
Somewhere I deem life must be gay,
The flowers are wrought not for the sake
Of those two murderers."
While she spake
Her hands were busy with her gown,
And at the end it slipped adown
And left her naked there and white
In the unshadowed noontide light.
Like Freyia in her house of gold,
A while her limbs did she behold
Clear mirrored in the lake beneath;
Then slowly, with a shuddering breath,
Stepped in the water cold, and played
Amid the ripple that she made,
And spoke again aloud, as though
The lone place of her heart might know:
"Soothly," she said, "if I knew fear,
Scarcely should I be sporting here,
But blinder surely has the crone
In those last months of winter grown,
Nor knows if I be foul or sweet,
Or sharp stripes might I chance to meet,
As heretofore it hath been seen
When I have dared to make me clean
Amid their foulness: loathes her heart
That one she hates should have a part
In the world's joy.—Well, time wears by
I was not made for misery.
Surely if dimly do mine eyes
Behold no sordid tale arise,
No ill life drawing near—who knows
But I am kept for greater woes,
Godlike despair that makes not base,
Though like a stone may grow the face
Because of it, yea, and the heart
A hard-wrought treasure set apart
For the world's glory?"
Therewith she
Made for the smooth bank leisurely,
And, naked as she was, did pass
Unto the warm and flowery grass
All unashamed, and fearing not
For aught that should draw nigh the spot:
And soothly had some hunter been
Near by and all her beauty seen,
He would have deemed he saw a fay
And hastened trembling on his way.
But when full joyance she had had
Of sun and flowers, her limbs she clad
In no long time, forsooth, and then
Called back her wandering flock again
With one strange dumb cry, e'en as though
Their hearts and minds she needs must know;
For hurrying back with many a bleat
They huddled round about her feet.
And back she went unto the stead,
Strange visions pressing round her head,
So light of heart and limb, that though
She went with measured steps and slow,
Each yard seemed but a dance to her.

So now the thick wood did she clear,
And o'er the bent beheld the sea,
And stood amazed there suddenly,
For a long-ship, with shield-hung rail,
And fair-stained flapping raven-sail,
And golden dragon-stem, there lay
On balanced oars amidst the bay,
Slow heaving with the unrippled swell.
With a strange hope she might not tell
Her eyes ran down the strand, and there
Lay beached a ship's boat painted fair,
And on the shingle by her side
Three blue-clad axemen did abide
Their fellows, sent belike ashore
To gather victuals for their store.

She looked not long; with heart that beat
More quickly and with hurrying feet
Unto the homestead did she pass,
And when anigh the door she was
She heard men's voices deep and rough;
Then the shrill crone, who said, "Enough
Of work I once had done for you,
But now my days left are but few
And I am weak; I prithee wait,

Already now the noon is late,
My daughter, Crow, shall soon be here."
"Nay," said a shipman, "have no fear,
Goodwife, a speedy death to get,
Thou art a sturdy carline yet:
Howbeit we well may wait a while."

Thereat Aslaug, with a strange smile,
Fresh from that water in the wood,
Pushed back the crazy door, and stood
Upon the threshold silently;
Bareheaded and barefoot was she,
And scarce her rags held each to each,
Yet did the shipmen stay their speech
And open-mouthed upon her stare,
As with bright eyes and face flushed fair
She stood; one gleaming lock of gold,
Strayed from her fair head's plaited fold,
Fell far below her girdlestead,
And round about her shapely head
A garland of dog-violet
And wind-flowers meetly had she set:
They deemed it little scathe indeed
That her coarse homespun ragged weed
Fell off from her round arms and lithe
Laid on the door-post, that a withe
Of willows was her only belt;
And each as he gazed at her felt
As some gift had been given him.

At last one grumbled, "Nowise dim
It is to see, goodwife, that this
No branch of thy great kinship is."

Grima was glaring on the may,
And scarce for rage found words to say:
"Yea, soothly is she of our kin:
Sixty-five winters changeth skin.
And whatsoever she may be,
Though she is dumb as a dead tree,
She worketh ever double-tide.
So, masters, ope your mealsacks wide
And fall to work; enow of wood
There is, I trow."
And there she stood,
Shaking all o'er, and when the may
Brushed past her going on her way,
From off the board a knife she caught,
And well-nigh had it in her thought
To end it all. Small heed the men
Would take of her, forsooth; and when
They turned their baking-work to speed,
And Aslaug fell the meal to knead,
He was the happiest of them all
Unto whose portion it did fall
To take the loaves from out her hand;
And gaping often would he stand,
And ever he deemed that he could feel
A trembling all along the peel
Whenas she touched it—sooth to say,
Such bread as there was baked that day
Was never seen: such as it was
The work was done, and they did pass
Down toward the ship, and as they went
A dull place seemed the thymy bent,
Gilded by sunset; the fair ship,
That soft in the long swell did dip
Her golden dragon, seemed nought worth,
And they themselves, all void of mirth,
Stammering and blundering in their speech,
Still looking back, seemed each to each
Ill-shapen, ugly, rough and base
As might be found in any place.

Well, saith the tale, and when the bread
Was broken, just as light as lead
Men found the same, as sweet as gall,
Half baked and sodden; one and all
Men gave it to the devil; at last
Unto their lord the story passed,
Who called for them, and bade them say
Why they had wrought in such a way;
They grinned and stammered, till said one:
"We did just e'en as must be done
When men are caught; had it been thou
A-cold had been the oven now."

"Ye deal in riddles," said the lord,
"Enough brine is there overboard
To fill you full if even so
Ye needs must have it."
"We did go,"
The man said, "to a house, and found
That lack of all things did abound;
A yellow-faced and blear-eyed crone
Was in the sooty hall alone;
But as he talked with her, and she
Spake to us ill and craftily,
A wondrous scent was wafted o'er
The space about the open door,
And all the birds drew near to sing,
And summer pushed on into spring,
Until there stood before our eyes
A damsel clad in wretched guise,
Yet surely of the gods I deem,
So fair she was;—well then this dream
Of Freyia on midsummer night,
This breathing love, this once-seen sight,
Flitted amidst us kneading meal,
And from us all the wits did steal;—
Hadst *thou* been wise?"

"Well," said the lord,
"This seemeth but an idle word;

Yet since ye all are in one tale
Somewhat to you it may avail—
Speak out! my lady that is dead—
Thora, the chief of goodlihead—
Came this one nigh to her at all?"

One answer from their mouths did fall,
That she was fairest ever seen.
"If two such marvellous things have been
Wrought by the gods, then have they wrought
Exceeding well," the lord said; "nought
Will serve me now but to have sight
Of her. and hear the fresh delight
Of her sweet voice."
"Nay, nay," one cried,
"The carline called the maid tongue-tied
E'en from her birth."
But thoughtfully
The lord spake: "Then belike shall be
Some wonder in the thing. Lo now,
Since I, by reason of my vow
Made on the cup at Yule, no more
May set foot upon any shore
Till I in Micklegarth have been,
And somewhat there of arms have seen,
Go ye at earliest morn and say
That I would see her ere the day
Is quite gone by; here shall she come
And go as if her father's home
The good ship were, and I indeed
Her very brother. Odin speed
The matter in some better wise,
Unless your words be nought but lies!"

So the next morn she had the word
To come unto their king and lord;
She answered not, but made as though
Their meaning she did fully know,
And gave assent: the crone was there,
And still askance at her did glare,
And midst her hatred grew afeard
Of what might come, but spoke no word;
And ye may well believe indeed
That those men gave her little heed,
But stared at Aslaug as she stood
Beside the greasy, blackened wood
Of the hall's uprights, fairer grown
Than yesterday, soft 'neath her gown
Her fair breast heaving, her wide eyes
Mid dreams of far-off things grown wise,
The rock dropped down in her left hand;—
There mazed awhile the men did stand,
Then gat them back. And so the sun
Waxed hot and waned, and, day nigh done,
Gleamed on the ship's side as she lay
Close in at deepest of the bay,
Her bridge gold-hung on either hand
Cast out upon the hard white sand;
While o'er the bulwarks many a man
Gazed forth; and the great lord began
To fret and fume, till on the brow
Of the low cliff they saw her now,
Who stood a moment to behold
The ship's sun-litten flashing gold;
Then slowly 'gan to get her down
A steep path in the sea-cliff brown,
Till on a sudden did she meet
The slant sun cast about its feet,
And flashed as in a golden cloud;
Since scarcely her poor raiment showed
Beneath the glory of her hair,
Whose last lock touched her ankles bare.

For so it was that as she went
Unto this meeting, all intent
Upon the time that was to be,
While yet just hidden from the sea,
She stayed her feet a little while,
And, gazing on her raiment vile,
Flushed red, and muttered,—
"Who can tell
But I may love this great lord well?
An evil thing then should it be
If he cast loathing eyes on mē
This first time for my vile attire."

Then, while her cheek still burned like fire,
She set hand to her hair of gold
Until its many ripples rolled
All over her, and nō great queen
Was e'er more gloriously beseen;
And thus she went upon her way.

Now when the crew beheld the may
Set foot upon the sand there rose
A mighty shout from midst of those
Rough seafarers; only the lord
Stood silent gazing overboard
With great eyes, till the bridge she gained,
And still the colour waxed and waned
Within his face; but when her foot
First pressed the plank, to his heart's root
Sweet pain there pierced, for her great eyes
Were fixed on his in earnest wise,
E'en as her thoughts were all of him;
And somewhat now all things waxed dim,
As unto her he stretched his hand,
And felt hers; and the twain did stand
Hearkening each other's eager breath.
But she was changed; for pale as death
She was now as she heard his voice.

"Full well may we this eve rejoice,
Fair maid, that thou hast come to us;

That this grey shore and dolorous
Holds greater beauty than the earth
Mid fairer days may bring to birth,
And that I hold it now. But come
Unto the wind-blown woven home,
Where I have dwelt alone awhile,
And with thy speech the hours beguile."

For nothing he remembered
Of what his men unto him said,
That she was dumb. Not once she turned
Her eyes from his; the low sun burned
Within her waving hair, as she
Unto the poop went silently
Beside him, and with faltering feet,
Because this hour seemed over sweet,
And still his right hand held her hand.

But when at last the twain did stand
Beneath the gold-hung tilt alone,
He said, "Thou seemest such an one
As who could love; thou look'st on me
As though thou hopedst love might be
Betwixt us—thou art pale, my sweet,
Good were it if our lips should meet."

Then mouth to mouth long time they stood
And when they sundered the red blood
Burnt in her cheek, and tenderly
Trembled her lips, and drew anigh
His lips again: but speech did break
Swiftly from out them, and she spake:
"May it be so, fair man, that thou
Art even no less happy now
Than I am."
With a joyous cry
He caught her to him hastily;
And mid that kiss the sun went down,
And colder was the dark world grown.
Once more they parted; "Ah, my love,"
He said, "I knew not aught could move
My heart to such joy as thy speech."

She made as if she fain would reach
Her lips to his once more; but ere
They touched, as smitten by new fear,
She drew aback and said: "Alas!
It darkens, and I needs must pass
Back to the land, to be more sad
Than if this joy I ne'er had had.
And thou—thou shalt be sorry too,
And pity me that it is so."

"To-morrow morn comes back the day,
He said, "If we should part, sweet may:
Yet why should I be left forlorn
Betwixt this even and the morn?"

His hand had swept aback her hair,
And on her shoulder, gleaming bare
From midst her rags, was trembling now;
But she drew back, and o'er her brow
Gathered a troubled thoughtful frown,
And on the bench she sat her down
And spake: "Nay, it were wise to bide
Awhile. Behold, the world is wide,
Yet have we found each other here,
And each to other seems more dear
Than all the world else.—Yet a king
Thou art, and I am such a thing,
By some half-dreamed-of chance cast forth
To live a life of little worth,
A lonely life—and it may be
That thou shouldst weary soon of me
If I abode here now—and I,
How know I? All unhappily
My life has gone; scarce a kind word
Except in dreams my ears have heard
But those thy lovely lips have said:
It might be when all things were weighed
That I too light of soul should prove
To hold for ever this great love."

Down at her feet therewith he knelt,
And round her his strong arms she felt
Drawing her to him, as he said:
"These are strange words for thee, O maid;
Are those sweet loving lips grown cold
So soon? Yet art thou in my hold,
And certainly my heart is hot.
What help against me hast thou got?"

Each unto each their cheeks were laid,
As in a trembling voice she said:
"No help, because so dear to me
Thou art, and mighty as may be;
Thou hast seen much, art wiser far
Than I am; yet strange thoughts there are
In my mind now—some half-told tale
Stirs in me, if I might avail
To tell it."
Suddenly she rose,
And thrust him from her; "Ah, too close!
Too close now, and too far apart
To-morrow!—and a barren heart,
And days that ever fall to worse,
And blind lives struggling with a curse
They cannot grasp! Look on my face,
Because I deem me of a race
That knoweth such a tale too well.
Yet if there be such tale to tell
Of us twain, let it e'en be so,
Rather than we should fail to know
This love—ah me, my love forbear!
No pain for thee and me I fear;

Yet strive we e'en for more than this!
Thou who hast given me my first bliss
To-day, forgive me, that in turn
I see the pain within thee burn,
And may not help—because mine eyes
The Gods make clear. I am grown wise
With gain of love, and hope of days
That many a coming age shall praise.

Awhile he gazed on her, and shook
With passion, and his cloak's hem took
With both hands as to rend it down;
Yet from his brow soon cleared the frown:
He said: "Yea, such an one thou art,
As needs alone must fill my heart
If I be like my father's kin,
And have a hope great deeds to win;
And surely nought shall hinder me
From living a great life with thee—
Say now what thou wouldst have me do."

"Some deed of fame thou goest to,"
She said, "for surely thou art great;
Go on thy way then, and if fate
So shapen is, that thou mayst come
Once more unto this lonely home,
There shalt thou find me, who will live
Through whatso days that fate may give,
Till on some happy coming day
Thine oars again make white the bay."

"If that might be remembered now,"
He said, "Last Yule I made a vow
In some far land to win me fame.
Come nigher, sweet, and hear my name
Before thou goest; that if so be
Death take me and my love from thee,
Thou mayst then think of who I was,
Nor let all memory of me pass
When thou to some great king art wed:
Then shalt thou say, 'Ragnar is dead,
Who was the son of Sigurd Ring,
Among the Danes a mighty king.
He might have had me by his side,'
Then shalt thou say, 'that hour he died;
But my heart failed and not his heart.'"

"Nay, make it not too hard to part,"
She said, when once again their lips
Had sundered; "as gold-bearing ships
Foundered amidmost of the sea,
So shall the loves of most men be,
And leave no trace behind. God wot
This heart of mine shall hate thee not
Whatso befall; but rather bless
Thee and this hour of happiness;
And if this tide shall come again
After hard longing and great pain,
How sweet, how sweet! O love, farewell,
Lest other tale there be to tell:
Yet heed this now lest afterward
It seem to thee a thing too hard
To keep thy faith to such as me;
I am belike what thou dost see,
A goatherd girl, a peasant maid,
Of a poor wretched crone afraid,
From dawn to dusk; despite of dreams
In morning tides, and misty gleams
Of wondrous stories, deem me such
As I have said, nor overmuch
Cast thou thy love upon my heart
If even such a man thou art
As needs must wed a great man's child."

He stepped aback from her and smiled,
And, stooping 'neath the lamp, drew forth
From a great chest a thing of worth—
A silken sark wrought wondrously
In some far land across the sea.
"One thing this is of many such
That I were fain thy skin should touch,"
He said, "if thou wouldst have it so."
But his voice faltered and sank low,
As though her great heart he 'gan fear.
She reached her fine strong hand anear
The farfetched thing; then smiling said:
"Strange that such fair things can be made
By men who die; and like it is
Thou think'st me worthy of all bliss;
But our rough hills and smoky house
Befit not aught so glorious,
E'en if thou come again to me;
And if not, greater grief to see
The gifts of dead love!—what say I,
Our crone should wear these certainly
If I but brought them unto land."

He flushed red, and his strong right hand
Fell to his sword-hilt. "Nay," she said,
"All that is nought if rightly weighed;
Hope and desire shall pass the days
If thou come back."
Grave was her face
And tremulous: he sighed: "Then take
This last gift only for my sake."
And once again their lips did touch
And cling together. "O many such,"
She said, "if the time did not fail,
And my heart too: of what avail
Against the hand of fate to strive?
Let me begin my life to live,
As it must be a weary space."

The moon smote full upon her face,
As on a trembling sea, as now

From the lamp-litten gold tilt low
She stepped into the fresher air,
He with her. Slow the twain did fare
Amidst the wondering men, till they
Had reached the bridge; then swift away
She turned, and passed the gold-hung rail,
And o'er the sands the moon made pale
Went gleaming, all alone: and he
Watched till her light feet steadily
Stepped up upon the dark cliff's brow;
But no one time she turned her now,
But vanished from him into night.
So there he watched till changing light
Brought the beginning of the tide
Of longing that he needs must bide;
Then he cried out for oars and sail,
And ere the morning star did fail
No more those cliffs his bird beheld,
As 'neath the wind the broad sail swelled.

BUT for the maiden, back she went
Unto the stead, and her intent
She changed in nought: no word she spake
What wrath soe'er on her might break
From the fell crone, on whom withal
Still heavier did that strange awe fall;
As well might be, for from the may
Had girlish lightness passed away
Into a sweet grave majesty,
That scarce elsewhere the world might see.

So wore the spring, and summer came
And went, and all the woods did flame
With autumn, as in that old tide
When slowly by the mirk hill-side
Went Heimir to his unseen death:
Then came the first frost's windless breath,
The steaming sea, the world all white,
And glittering morn and silent night,
As when the little one first felt
The world a-cold; and still she dwelt
Unchanged since that first spark of love
Wrought the great change, that so did move
Her heart to perfect loveliness.
Nor overmuch did the days press
Upon her with the weary waste
Of short life, that too quick doth haste
When joy is gained: if any thought
Thereof unto her heart was brought,
Rather it was, "Ah, overlong
For brooding over change and wrong
When that shall come! Good gain to me
My love's eyes one more time to see,
To feel once more his lips' delight,
And die with the short summer night,
Not shamed nor sorry! But if I
Must bear the weight of misery
In the after days, yet even then
May I not leave to unborn men
A savour of sweet things, a tale
That midst all woes shall yet prevail
To make the world seem something worth?"

So passed the winter of the North,
And once again was come the spring;
Then whiles would she go loitering
Slow-footed, and with hanging head,
Through budding brake, o'er flowery mead,
With blood that throbbed full quickly now,
If o'er the flowers her feet were slow,
And bonds about her seemed to be.
Yet wore the spring-tide lingeringly
Till on a morn of latter May,
When her soft sleep had passed away,
Nought but the bright-billed sweet-throat bird
Within the thorn at first she heard;
But, even as her heart did meet
The first wave of desire o'ersweet,
The winding of a mighty horn
Adown the breeze of May was borne,
And throbbing hope on her did fall:
Yet from her bed she leapt withal,
And clad herself, and went about
Her work, as though with ne'er a doubt
That this day e'en such like should be
As was the last; and so while she
Quickened the fire and laid the board,
Mid the crone's angry, peevish word
Of surly wonder, the goodman,
With axe on shoulder, swiftly ran
Adown the slope; but presently
Came breathless back:
"Ah, here they be!
Come back again for something worse,"
Said he. "This dumb maid is some curse
Laid on us."
"Well," the goodwife said,
"Who be they?" "They who baked their bread
Within this house last spring," said he.
"Oft did I marvel then why she,
This witch-maid, went unto the strand
That eve."
"Nay, maybe comes to hand
Some luck," the crone said. "Hold thy peace,"
He said. "What goodhap or increase
From that ill night shall ever come?
Rather I deem that now come home
Those fifteen years of murder: lo,
The worst of all we soon shall know,
I hear their voices."
Silently,
If somewhat pale, Aslaug passed by

From fire to board, as though she heard
And noted nothing of that word,
Whate'er it was: yet now, indeed,
The clink of sword on iron weed,
And voices of the seafarers,
Came clear enow unto her ears;
Nor was it long or e'er the door
Was darkened, as one stood before
The light and cried:
"Hail to this house,
If here still dwells the glorious
Fair maiden, that across the seas
We come for!"
Aslaug on her knees
Knelt by the brightening fire and dropped
The meal into the pot, nor stopped
For all their words, but with her hand
Screened her fair face. Then up did stand
The goodman, quaking:
"Well," he said,
"Good be my meed! for we have fed
This dumb maid all for kindness' sake."

"No need," he said, "long words to make,
And little heed we thy lies now,
But if she doom thee to the bough.
—All hail, our Lady and our Queen!"

For she, arisen, with glorious mien
Was drawing near the board, and bare
The porridge-bowl and such-like gear
Past where the men stood; tremblingly
The leader of them drew anigh,
And would have taken them, but she
Swerved from his strong hand daintily,
Smiled on him and passed by, and when
They were set down turned back again
And spoke, and well then might rejoice
That dusky place to hear her voice
For the first time:
"I doubt me not,
O seafarers, but ye have got
A message from that goodly lord
Who spake last year a pleasant word,
Hard to believe for a poor maid."

Trembled the twain at what she said
Less than the unexpected sound,
For death seemed in the air around.
But the man spake: "E'en thus he saith,
That he, who heretofore feared death
In nowise, feared this morn to come
And seek thee out in thy poor home,
Lest he should find thee dead or gone;
For scarce he deemed so sweet a one
Could be for him: 'But if she live,'
He said, 'and still her love can give
To me, let her make no delay,
For fear we see no other day
Wherein to love.'"
She said: "Come, then!
It shames me not that of all men
I love him best. But have ye there
Somewhat these twain might reckon dear?
Their life is ill enow to live
But that withal they needs must strive
With griping want when I am gone."

He answered, "O thou goodly one,
Here have we many a dear-bought thing
Because our master bade us bring
All queenly gear for thee, and deems
That thou, so clad as well beseems
That lovely body, wouldst aboard;
But all we have is at thy word
To keep or spend."
"Nay, friends," she said,
"If thy lord loves my goodlihead,
Fain would I bear alone to him
What wealth I have of face or limb,
For him to deck when all is his,
So full enow shall even this
That I am dight with be for me;
But since indeed of his bounty
He giveth unto me to give—
Take ye this gold, ye twain, and live
E'en as ye may—small need to bless
Or curse your sordid churlishness,
Because methinks, without fresh curse,
Each day that comes shall still be worse
Than the past day, and worst of all
Your ending day on you shall fall.
Yet, if it may be, fare ye well,
Since in your house I came to dwell
Some wearing of my early days."

E'en as she spake, her glorious face
Shone the last time on that abode,
And her light feet the daisies trod
Outside the threshold. But the twain
Stood 'mazed above the bounteous gain
Of rings and gems and money bright,
And a long while, for mere affright
And wonder, durst not handle it.

But while the butterfly did flit
White round about the feet of her,
Above the little May-flowers fair,
She went adown the hill with these,
Until the low wash of the seas
They heard, and murmuring of the men
Who manned the long-ships; quickly then
They showed above the grey bent's brow,
And all the folk beheld them now

'Twixt oar and gunwhale that abode,
And to the sky their shout rose loud.
But when upon the beach she came,
A bright thing in the sun did flame
'Twixt sun and ship-side, and the sea
Foamed, as one waded eagerly
Unto the smooth and sea-beat sand,
And for one moment did she stand
Breathless, with beating heart, and then
To right and left drew back the men;
She heard a voice she deemed well known,
Long waited through dull hours bygone,
And round her mighty arms were cast:
But when her trembling red lips passed
From out the heaven of that dear kiss,
And eyes met eyes, she saw in his
Fresh pride, fresh hope, fresh love, and saw
The long sweet days still onward draw,
Themselves still going hand in hand,
As now they went adown the strand.

NEXT morn, when they awoke to see
Each other's hands draw lovingly
Each unto each, awhile they lay
Silent, as though night passed away
They grudged full sore: till the King said
Unto the happy golden head
That lay upon his breast, "What thought
By those few hours of dark was brought
Unto thy heart, my love? Did dreams
Make strange thy loving sleep with gleams
Of changing days that yet may be?"

She answered, but still dreamily:
"In sleep a little while ago
O'er a star-litten world of snow
I fared, till suddenly nearby
A swirling fire blazed up on high;
Thereto I went, and without scathe
Passed through the flame, as one doth bathe
Within a summer stream, and there
I saw a golden palace fair
Ringed round about with roaring flame.
Unto an open door I came,
And entered a great hall thereby,
And saw where 'neath a canopy
A King and Queen there sat, more fair
Than the world knoweth otherwhere:
And much methought my heart smiled then
Upon that goodliest of all men,
That sweetest of all womankind.
Then one methought a horn did wind
Without, and the King turned and spake:

"'Wherewith do the hall pillars shake,
O Queen, O love?'

She moved her head,
And in a voice like music said:
'This is the fame of Ragnar's life,
The breath of all the glorious strife
Wherewith his days shall wear.'
Then he:
'What is the shadow that I see
Adown the hall?'
Then said the Queen:
'Our daughter surely hadst thou seen
If thine eyes saw as clear as mine:
Well worth she is our love divine,
And unto Ragnar is she wed,
The best man since that thou art dead,
My King, my love, mine own, mine own.'

"Then the twain kissed upon the throne,
And the dream passed and sleep passed too."

Therewith the King her body drew
Nearer to him, if it might be,
And spake: "A strange dream came to me.
Upon a waste at dawn I went
And wandered over vale and bent,
And ever was it dawn of day,
And still upon all sides there lay
The bones of men, and war-gear turned
To shards and rust; then far off burned
A fire, and thither quick I passed.
And when I came to it at last
Dreadful it seemed, impassable;
But I, fain of that land to tell
What things soever might be known,
Went round about, and up and down,
And gat no passing by the same;
Until, methought, just where the flame
Burned highest, through the midst I saw
A man and woman toward me draw,
Even as through a flowery wood:
So came they unto where I stood,
And glad at heart therewith I grew,
For such fair folk as were the two
Ne'er had I seen; then the man cried:

"'Hail to thee, Ragnar! well betide
This dawn of day. Stretch forth thine hand.'

"E'en as he bade me did I stand,
Abiding what should hap, but he
Turned to the woman lovingly,
And from her bosom's fresh delight
Drew forth a blooming lily white,
And set it in mine hand, and then
Both through the flame went back again.

"Then afterwards in earth I set
This lily, and with soft regret

Watched for its fading; but withal
Great light upon the world did fall,
And fair the sun rose o'er the earth,
And blithe I grew and full of mirth:
And no more on a waste I was,
But in a green world, where the grass
White lily-blooms well-nigh did hide;
O'er hill and valley far and wide
They waved in the warm wind; the sun
Seemed shining upon everyone,
As though it loved it: and with that
I woke, and up in bed I sat
And saw thee waking, O my sweet!"

With that last word their lips did meet,
And even the fresh May morning bright
Was noted not in their delight.

Let be—as ancient stories tell
Full knowledge upon Ragnar fell
In lapse of time, that this was she
Begot in the felicity
Swift-fleeting, of the wondrous twain,
Who afterwards through change and pain
Must live apart to meet in death.

But, would ye know what the tale saith,
In the Old Danish tongue is writ
Full many a word concerning it,—
The days through which these lovers passed,
Till death made end of all at last.
But so great Ragnar's glory seemed
To Northern folk, that many deemed
That for his death, when song arose
From that Northumbrian Adder-close,
England no due atonement paid
Till Harald Godwinson was laid
Beside his fallen banner, cold
Upon the blood-soaked Sussex mould,
And o'er the wrack of Senlac field
Full-fed the grey-nebbed raven wheeled.

In the dim place that the sun knew no more
He rose up when his tale was fully o'er,
And 'gan to pace the long hall to and fro
With old eyes looking downward, e'en as though
None else were there: at last with upraised face
He walked back swiftly to his fire-lit place,
And sat him down, and turned to the young folk
Smiling perforce; then from their lips outbroke
The murmuring speech his moody looks had stilled,
And with a sweet sound was the hall full filled;
E'en like the noise that from the thin wood's side
Swims through the dawning day at April-tide
Across the speckled eggs, when from the brown
Soft feathers glittering eyes are looking down
Over the dewy meads, too fresh and fair
For aught but lovely feet to wander there.

Drag on, long night of winter, in whose heart,
Nurse of regret, the dead spring yet has part!
Drag on, O night of dreams! O night of fears!
Fed by the summers of the bygone years!

JANUARY.

FROM this dull rainy undersky and low,
This murky ending of a leaden day,
That never knew the sun, this half-thawed snow,
These tossing black boughs faint against the grey
Of gathering night, thou turnest, dear, away
Silent, but with thy scarce-seen kindly smile
Sent through the dusk my longing to beguile.

There, the lights gleam, and all is dark without!
And in the sudden change our eyes meet dazed—
O look, love, look again! the veil of doubt
Just for one flash, past counting, then was raised!
O eyes of heaven, as clear thy sweet soul blazed
On mine a moment! O come back again
Strange rest and dear amid the long dull pain!

Nay, nay, gone by! though there she sitteth still,
With wide grey eyes so frank and fathomless—
Be patient, heart, thy days they yet shall fill
With utter rest—Yea, now thy pain they bless,
And feed thy last hope of the world's redress—
O unseen hurrying rack! O wailing wind!
What rest and where go ye this night to find?

THE year has changed its name since that last tale;
Yet nought the prisoned spring doth that avail.
Deep buried under snow the country lies;
Made dim by whirling flakes the rook still flies
South-west before the wind; noon is as still
As midnight on the southward-looking hill,
Whose slopes have heard so many words and loud
Since on the vine the woolly buds first showed.
The raven hanging o'er the farmstead gate,
While for another death his eye doth wait,
Hears but the muffled sound of crowded byre
And winds' moan round the wall. Up in the spire
The watcher set high o'er the half-hid town
Hearkens the sound of chiming bells fall down
Below him; and so dull and dead they seem
That he might well-nigh be amidst a dream
Wherein folk hear and hear not.

Such a tide,
With all work gone from the hushed world outside,
Still finds our old folk living, and they sit
Watching the snow-flakes by the window flit
Midmost the time 'twixt noon and dusk; till now
One of the elders clears his knitted brow,
And says:

"Well, hearken of a man who first
In every place seemed doomed to be accursed;
To tell about his ill hap lies on me;
Before the winter is quite o'er, maybe
Some other mouth of his good hap may tell;
But no third tale there is, of what befell
His fated life, when he had won his place;
And that perchance is not so ill a case
For him and us; for we may rise up, glad
At all the rest and triumph that he had
Before he died; while he, forgetting clean
The sorrow and the joy his eyes had seen,
Lies quiet and well famed—and serves to-day
To wear a space of winter-tide away."

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS.

ARGUMENT.

Hipponoüs, son of Glaucus King of Corinth, unwittingly slew his brother Beller, and, fleeing from his country, came to Prœtus King of Argos, who purified him of his guilt; and thereafter was he called Bellerophon. He dwelt long with Prœtus, well loved by him, and receiving many good things at his hands; but at last he lost the King's favour by the guile of the Queen Sthenobœa, and was sent to Jobates King of Lycia, her father, with a covert message of evil.

PRŒTUS, the King of Argos, on a day
In tangled forests drave the boar to bay,
And had good hap, for ere the noon was o'er
He set his foot upon the third huge boar
His steel that day had reached; then, fain of rest,
The greensward 'neath the spreading oak-trees pressed,
And, king-like, feasted with his folk around.
Nor lacked he for sweet music's measured sound,
For when somewhat were men's desires appeased
Of meat and drink, their weary limbs well eased,
There 'gan an ancient hunter and his son
To tell of glorious deeds in old days done
Within the wood; but as Lyæus' gift,
And measured words from common life did lift
The thoughts of men, and noble each man seemed
Unto his fellow, from afar there gleamed
Sun-litten arms, and 'twixt the singer's word
The slow tramp of a great horse soon they heard,
And from a glade that pierced the thicket through
In sight at last a mounted man there drew.
Then the dogs growled, and midst their weapons' clang
Unto their feet the outmost hunters sprang,
Handling their spears; but still King Prœtus lay,
Till nigh the circle that lone man made stay,
And with wild eyes gazed down upon the throng.
Wearied he seemed, and his black war-horse strong
On many a mile had left both sweat and blood,
And panting now with drooping head he stood,
Forgetting all the eager joys of speed;
And tattered was his rider's lordly weed,
His broken sheath now held a sword no more,
With rust his armour bright was spotted o'er,
Unkempt and matted was the yellow hair
That crowned his head, nor was there helmet there;
His face, that should have been as fair and bright
And ruddy as a maid's, was deadly white,
And drawn and haggard; and his grey eyes stared,
As though of something he were sore afeard
That other folk saw not at all. But now
A hunter cried out, "Nay, and who art thou?
What God or man pursues thee? bide and speak;
Nor yet shalt thou for nought the King's rest break."
A scared look did the man behind him fling,
Then said, "Stand close around me: to your King
When I may see him, will I tell the tale;
Unless indeed, meanwhile, my life should fail."

With that, as one who hath but little might,
From off his wearied steed did he alight.
They led him to the King, who 'gainst a tree
Stood upright now, the new-come man to see;
Who brought unto him would not meet his eyes,
But stood and stared distraught in dreamy wise;
Till cheerily the King of Argos said,
"Cast somewhat off, O friend, thy drearyhead;
Sit thee and eat and drink, and be my guest;
I will not harm thee though thou be unblest;
Let Gods or men take vengeance as they can,
Nor ask my help, who dwell a peaceful man
'Twixt white-walled Argos and the rustling trees."
The man turned round, as asking what were these,
The words he said; then, casting here and there
A troubled look, as if not safe he were
From some dread thing that followed even yet,
He sat him down, and like a starved man ate:
Yet did he tremble as he took the food,
And in the cup he gazed, as though the blood
Of man it held, and not the blood of earth,
The stirrer up to kindly words and mirth.
But when his hunger now was satisfied,
Casting his hair aback the King he eyed,
And in a choked and husky voice he said:

"Now can ye see, O folk, I am not dead;
But tell me, King, how shall I name thee here,
Since he in whose heart lieth any prayer,
To nameless Gods will let no warm words flow?"
"To Prœtus pray for what thou wouldest now,"
The King said; "by the soil of Argos pray:
To no light matter will I say thee nay,
For my heart giveth to thee: name thy name,
And say whereby these evils on thee came."

With changing eyes now gazed the outcast man
On Prœtus' cheery face, and colour ran
O'er his wan visage. "Thou art kind," he said;
"But kinder eyes I knew, that on the dead
Must look for ever now; and joy is gone:
Best hadst thou cast forth such a luckless one;
For what I love I slay, and what I hate
I strive to save from out the hands of Fate.
Listen and let me babble: I have seen
Since that hour was, nought but the long leaves green,
The tree-trunks, and the scared things of the wood."
Then silently awhile he seemed to brood
O'er what had been, but even as the King
Opened his lips to mind him of the thing
That he should tell, from his bent head there came
Slow words, as if from one confessing shame,
While nigher to his mouth King Prœtus drew.

"Hipponoüs men have called me, ere I knew
The hate of Gods and fear of men; my life
Went past at Corinth free from baneful strife,
For there my father ruled from sea to sea,
Glaucus the Great: and fair Eurymede,
My mother, bare another son to him,
Like unto me in mind and face and limb,
Whom men called Beller; and most true it is
That I with him dwelt long in love and bliss,
However long ago that seems to be.
What plans we laid for joyous victory!
What lovely lands untilled we thought to win,
And be together even as Gods therein,
Bringing the monsters of the world to nought!
How eagerly from old men news we sought
Of lands that lay anigh the ocean-stream!
And yet withal what folly then did seem
Their cold words and their weary hopeless eyes;
When this alone of all things then seemed wise,
To know how sweet life was, how dear the earth;
And only fluttering hope stayed present mirth—
Ah, how I babble! What a thing man is,
Who, falling unto misery out of bliss,
Thinks that new wisdom but the sole thing then
That binds the many ways of toiling men!

"In one fair chamber did we sleep a-night,
I and my brother—there, 'twixt light and light,
Three nights together did I dream a dream,
Where lying on my bed I still did seem
E'en as I was indeed, when a cold hand
Was laid upon me, and a shape did stand
By my bed-head, a woman clad in grey,
Like to the lingering time 'twixt night and day,
And veiled her face was, and her tall gaunt form.
She drew me from my peaceful bed and warm,
And led me, shuddering, bare-foot, o'er the floor,
Until, with beating heart, I stood before
My brother's bed, and knew what I should do;
For from beneath her shadowy robe she drew
A well-steeled feathered dart, and that must I,
Casting all will aside, clutch mightily,
And, still unable with her will to strive,
E'en as her veiled hand pointed, madly drive
Into the heart of mine own mother's son,
Striving to scream as that ill deed was done.

"No cry came forth, but even with the stroke,
With sick and fainting heart, I nigh awoke.
And when the dream again o'er me was cast,
Chamber, and all I knew, away had passed,
Nor saw I more the ghost: alone I stood
In a strange land, anigh an oaken wood
High on a hill; and far below my feet
The white walls of a glorious town did meet
A yellow strand and ship-beset green sea;
And all methought was as a toy for me,
For I was king thereof and great enow.

"But as I stood upon that hill's green brow,
Rejoicing much, yet yearning much indeed
For something past that still my heart must need,
Once more was all changed; by the windy sea
Did men hold games with great solemnity
In honour of some hero passed away,
Whose body dead upon a huge pile lay
Waiting the torch, and people far and wide
About the strand a name I knew not cried,
Lamenting him who once had been their king;
But when I saw the face of the dead thing
Over whose head so many a cry was thrown
On to the wind, I knew it for mine own.

"Cold pangs shot through me then, sleep's bonds I broke;
Shuddering with terror in my bed I woke,
And when thought came again, a weight of fear
Lay on my heart and still grew heavier;
But when the next night and the third night came,
And still in sleep my visions were the same,
No longer in mine own heart could I hold
The story of that marvel quite untold,
For fear possessed me: good at first it seemed

That I should tell the dream so strangely dreamed
Unto my brother; then I feared that he
Might for that tale look with changed eyes on me
As deeming that some secret hope had wrought
Within my false heart, and that pageant brought
Before mine eyes; or he might flee the land
To save our house from some accursed hand;
And either way that dream seemed hard to tell
That yet, untold, made for my soul a hell.

"But of a certain elder now I thought,
Who much of lore to both of us had taught
And loved us well; Diana's priest was he,
And in the wild woods served her faithfully,
Dwelling with new folk in her woodland shrine,
That from the hillside such a man sees shine
As goes from Corinth unto Sicyon.
"And now amid these thoughts was night nigh done,
And the dawn glimmered; I grew hot to go
To that old priest these troublous things to show:
So from my bed I rose up silently,
And with all haste I did my weed on me,
And went unto the door; but as I passed
The fair porch through, I saw how 'gainst the last
Brass-adorned pillar lay a feathered dart;
And therewith came new fear into my heart,
For as the dart that I in dreams had seen
So was it fashioned, and with feathers green
And scarlet was the hinder end bedight,
And round the shaft were bands of silver white.
Then scarcely did I know if still I dreamed,
Yet, looking at the shaft, withal it seemed
Good unto me to take it in my hand,
That the old man the more might understand
How real my dream had been in very deed,
And give me counsel better to my need.
"With that I caught it up, and went my way,
And almost ere the sun had made it day
Was I within the woods, and hastening on,
Afire until the old man's house were won,
And like a man who walks in sleep I went
Nor noted aught amid my strong intent.
"But when I reached the little forest fane
I found my labour had but been in vain;
For there the priest's folk told me he had gone
The eve before to Corinth, all alone,
And on some weighty matter, as they deemed;
For measurelessly troubled still he seemed.
His trouble troubled me, because I thought
That unto him sure knowledge had been brought
Of some great danger hanging over me,
And that he thither went my face to see,
While I was seeking him; and therewithal
Great fear and heaviness on me did fall;
And all the life I once had thought so sweet
Now seemed a troublous thing and hard to meet.

"So cityward again I set my face,
And through the woodland glades I rode apace,
And halfway betwixt dawn and noon had I
Unto the wood's edge once more come anigh;
And now upon the wind I seemed to hear
The sound of mingled voices drawing near;
Whereon I stayed to hearken and cried out,
But feeble was the sound from my parched throat;
And listening afterward I heard not now
Those sounds, and timorous did my faint heart grow,
And tales of woodfolk my vexed mind did take.
But just as I the well-wrought reins would shake,
Grown nigher did I hear those sounds again,
And drew aback the hand that held the rein,
And even therewith stalked forth into the way
From out the thicket a huge wolf and grey,
And stood with yellow eyes that glared on me;
And I stared too; my folly made me see
No wolf, but some dread deity, in him;
But trembling as I was in every limb,
E'en as his growling smote upon my heart,
Tighter my fingers clutched the dreadful dart,
I made a shift in stirrups up to stand,
And hurled the quivering shaft from out my hand;
Then fire seemed all around me, and a pang
Crushed down my heart as from the thicket rang
A dreadful cry: clear saw I, even as he
Who meets the Father's visage suddenly;
No wolf was there; but o'er the herbage ran
With staggering steps a pale and bleeding man:
His left hand on the shaft, whose banded wood
Over the barbs within his bosom stood,
His right hand raised against me, as he fell
Close to my horse-hoofs; and I knew full well
That this my brother's last farewell should be,
And thus his face henceforward should I see.

"What else? it matters not; the priest I saw,
And armed men from the thicket toward me draw,
With scared eyes fixed on mine; I drew my sword,
And sat there, waiting for a dreadful word,
Biding the rush of many men on me;
But they began to draw round silently,
And ere the circle yet was fully made,
I, who at first might even thus have stayed
For death and curses, felt the love of life
Stir up my heart again to hope and strife;
Yea, even withal I saw in one bright gleam
The latter ending of my dreaded dream.
So, crying out, strongly my horse I spurred,
And as he, rearing up, dashed forth, I heard
Clatter of arms and cries, a spear flew o'er
My bended head, a well-aimed arrow tore
My helm therefrom; yet then a cry there came:
'Take him alive, nor bring a double shame
Upon the great house!' Even therewith I drave

Against a mighty man as wave meets wave;
Back flew my right arm, and my sword was gone,
Whirled off as from a sling the wave-worn stone,
And my horse reeled, but he before me lay
Rolled over, horse and man, and in my way
Was no one now, as I spurred madly on:
And so in no long time the race I won,
For nobly was I mounted; and I deem
That to the most of those men did it seem
No evil thing that I should ride away.

"O King, I think this happed but yesterday,
And now already do I deem that I
Did no good deed in seeking not to die,
For I am weary, and the Gods made me
A luckless man among all folk to be—
I care not if their purpose I undo,
Since now I doubt not that the thing is so—
—And yet am I so made, that, having life,
Must I, though ever worsted in the strife,
Cling to it still too much to gain the rest,
Which yet I know of all things is the best,
Then slay me, King! lo now, I pray for this,
And no least portion of thy hoarded bliss:
Slay me, and let the oak-boughs say their say
Over my bones through the wild winter day!
Slay me, for I am fain thereto to go,
Where no talk is of either bliss or woe."

"Nay," said the King, "didst thou not eat and drink
When hunger drave thee e'ennow? yea and shrink
When my men's spears were pointed at thy breast?
Be patient; thou indeed shalt gain thy rest,
But many a thing has got to come ere then:
For all things die, and thou midst other men
Shalt scarce remember thou hast had a friend.
At worst before thou comest to the end
Joy shalt thou have, and sorrow: wherefore come;
With me thou well mayst have no hapless home.
Dread not the Gods; ere long time has gone by
Thy soul from all guilt will we purify,
And sure no heavy curse shall lie on thee.
Nay, did their anger cause this thing to be?
Perchance in heaven they smile upon thy gain—
—Lo, for a little while a burning pain,
Then yearning unfulfilled a little space,
Then tender memories of a well-loved face
In quiet hours, and then—forgetfulness—
How hadst thou rather borne, still less and less
To love what thou hadst loved, till it became
A thing to be forgotten, a great shame
To think thou shouldst have wasted life thereon?
Come then—thou spakest of a kingdom won
Thy dream foretold, and shall not this be too,
E'en as the dreadful deed thou cam'st to do?
To horse! and unto Argos let us wend,
Begin thy life afresh with me for friend.
Wide is the world, nor yet for many a day
Will every evil thing be cleared away
That bringeth scathe to men within its girth;
Surely a man like thee can win the mirth
That cometh of the conquering of such things;
For not in vain art thou the seed of kings
Unless thy face belie thee—nay, no more!
Why speak I vain words to a heart still sore
With sudden death of happiness? yet come
And ride with us unto our lovely home."

Hipponoüs to the King's word answered nought,
But sat there brooding o'er his dreary thought,
Nor seemed to hear; and when the Argive men
Brought up to him his battle-steed again,
Scarce witting of the company or place,
He mounted, and with set and weary face
Rode as they bade him at the King's left hand:
Nor did the sight of the fair well-tilled land,
When that they gained from out the tangled wood,
Do aught in dealing with his mournful mood;
Nor Argos' walls as from the fields they rose,
Such good things with their mightiness to close
From chance of hurt; scarce saw he the fair gate,
Dainty to look on, yet so huge of weight;
Nor did the streets' well-ordered houses draw
His eyes to look at them; unmoved he saw
The south-land merchants' dusky glittering train;
About the fountain the slim maids in vain
Drew sleek arms from the water, or turned round
With shaded eyes at the great horn's hoarse sound.
The sight of the King's house, deemed of all men
A wonder mid the houses kings had then,
Drew from him but a troubled frown, as though
Men's toilsome folly he began to know;
The carven Gods within the banquet-hall,
The storied hangings that bedight the wall,
Made his heart sick to think of labour vain,
Telling once more the oft-told tale of pain.
Cold in the damsel's hand his strong hand lay,
When to the steaming bath she led the way;
And when another damsel brought for him
Raiment wherein the Tyrian dye showed dim
Amid the gold lines of the broideries,
Her face downcast because she might not please,
He heeded not. When to the hall he passed,
And by the high seat he was set at last,
Then Prœtus, smiling from his mild eyes, laid
A hand upon his combed-out hair and said:

"Surely for no good luck this golden hair
Has come to Argos, and this visage fair,
To make us, who were well enow before,
Seem to our maids like churls at the hall-door,

Prying about when men to war are gone
And girls and children sit therein alone."

But nought Hipponoüs heeded the King's say,
But, turning, roughly put his hand away,
And frowning muttered, and still further drew,
As a man touched amid his dream might do.

In sooth he dreamed, and dreary was his dream;
A bitter thing the world to him did seem;
The void of life to come he peopled now
With folk of scornful eyes and brazen brow;
And one by one he told the tale of days
Wherein an envious mock was the world's praise;
Where good deeds brought ill fame, and truth was not,
Hate was remembered, love was soon forgot;
No face was good for long to look upon,
And nought was worthy when it once was won;
But narrow, helpless, friendless was the way,
That led unto the last most hopeless day
Of hopeless days, in tangled, troubled wise.
So thought he, till the tears were in his eyes
Since he was young yet, for hope lying dead.

But on his fixed eyes and his weary head
The happy King of Argos gazed awhile,
Till from his eye faded the scornful smile
That lingered on his lips; and now he turned,
As one who long ago that task had learned,
And unto the great men about him spoke,
And was a merry king of merry folk.

So passed the feast and all men drew to sleep,
And e'en Hipponoüs his soul might steep
In sweet forgetfulness a little while;
And somewhat did the fresh young day beguile
His treasured sorrow when he woke next morn,
And somewhat less he felt himself forlorn:
Nor did the King forget him, but straight sent
Unto the priests, and told them his intent
That this his guest should there be purified,
Since he with honour in his house should bide.

So was Jove's house made ready for that thing,
And thither amid songs and harp-playing,
White-robed and barefoot, was Hipponoüs brought
Who, bough in hand, for peace that God besought.
Noiseless the white bulls fell beneath the stroke
Of the gold-girdled, well-taught temple folk:
Up to the roof arose the incense-cloud;
The chanted prayer of men, now low now loud,
Thrilled through the brazen leaves of the great door;
Thick lay the scattered herbs upon the floor,
And in the midst at last the hero stood,
Freed of the guilt of shedding kindred blood.
And then the chief priest cried, "Bellerophon,
With this new hapless name that thou hast won,
Go forth, go free, be happy once again,
But no more called Hipponoüs of men."

Then forth Bellerophon passed wearily,
Although so many prayers had set him free;
Yet somewhat was he ready to forget,
And turn unto the days that might be yet.

But when before King Prœtus' throne he came,
The King called out on him by his new name;
"O fair Bellerophon, like me, be wise,
And set things good to win before thine eyes,
Lands, and renown, and riches, and a life
That knows from day to day so much of strife
As makes men happy, since the age of gold
Is past, if e'er it was, as a tale told."

"O King," he said, "thou sittest in full day,
Thou strivest to put thoughts of night away;
My life has not yet left the morning-tide;
And I, who find the world that seemed so wide,
Now narrowed to a little troublous space
Where help is not, astonied turn my face
Unto the coming hours, nor know at all
What thing of joy or hope to me will fall.
Be patient, King; perchance within a while
No marfeast I may be, but learn to smile
Even as thou, who lovest life so much.
Who knows but grief may vanish at a touch,
As joy does? and a long way off is death:
Some folk seem glad even to draw their breath."

"Yea," said the King, "thou hast it, for indeed
I fain would live, like most men—but what need
Unto a fevered man to talk of wine?
Thy heart shall love life when it grows like mine.
But come thou hence, and I will show to thee
What things of price the Gods have given to me.
Not good it is to harp on the frayed string;
And thou, so seeing many a lovely thing,
Mayst hide thy weary pain a little space."

And therewith did King Prœtus from that place
Draw forth Bellerophon, and so when he
In his attire was now clad royally,
From out the precinct to his palace fair
Did the King bring him; and he showed him there
His stables, where the war-steeds stood arow
Over the dusty grain: then did they go
To armouries, where sword and spear and shield
Hung bloodless, ready for the fated field:
The treasury showed he, where things richly wrought
Together into such a place were brought,

That he who stole the oxen of a God,
For all his godlike cunning scarce had trod
Untaken on its floor—withal he showed
The chamber where the broidered raiment glowed,
Where the spice lay, and scented unguents fit
To touch Queen Venus' skin and brighten it;
The ivory chairs and beds of ivory
He showed him, and he bid his tired eyes see
The stories wrought on brazen doors, the flowers
And things uncouth carved on the wood of bowers;
The painted walls that told things old and new,
Things come to pass, and things that onward drew.

But all the while Bellerophon's grave face
And soon-passed smile seemed unmeet for that place,
And ever Prœtus felt a pang of fear,
As if it told of times a-drawing near,
When all the wealth and beauty that was his
Should not avail to buy one hour of bliss.
And sometimes when he watched his wandering eyes
And heard his stammering speech, would there arise
Within his heart a feeling like to hate,
Mingled with scorn of one so crushed by fate:
For ever must the rich man hate the poor.

Now at the last they stood without a door
Adorned with silver, wrought of precious wood;
Then Prœtus laughed, and said, "O guest, thy mood
Is hard to deal with; never any leech
Has striven as I thy sickness' heart to reach;
And I grow weary and must get me aid."
Therewith upon the lock his hand he laid
And pushed the door aback, and then the twain
The daintiest of all passages did gain,
And as betwixt its walls they passed along
Nearer they drew unto the measured song
Of sweet-voiced women; and the King spake then:
"Drive fire out with fire, say all wise men;
Here mayst thou set thine eyes on such an one,
That thou no more wilt think of days agone,
But days to come; for here indeed my spouse
Watches the damsels in the weaving-house,
Or in the pleasance sits above their play;
And certes here upon no long-past day,
Unless my eyes were bleared with coming eld,
Fair sights for such as thou have I beheld."
Across the exile's brow a frown there came,
As though his sorrow of such things thought shame,
Yet mayhap his eye brightened as he heard
The song grow louder and the hall they neared;
But the King smiled, and swiftlier led him on,
Until unto the door thereof they won.

Now noble was that hall and fair enow,
Betwixt whose slim veined pillars set arow,
And marble lattice wrought like flowering trees,
Showed the green freshness of the summer seas,
Made cheery by the sun, and many a ship,
Whose black bows smoothly through the waves did slip.
In bowls whereon old stories pictured were
The bright rose-laurels trembled in the air,
That from the sea stole through the lattices,
And round them hummed a few bewildered bees.
Midmost the pavement, wrought by toil of years,
A tree was set, gold-leaved like that which bears
Unto the maids of Hesperus strange fruit;
A many-coloured serpent from the root
Curled upward round the stem, and, reaching o'er
A four-square silver laver, did outpour
Bright glittering water from his throat of brass;
And at each corner of the basin was
A brazen hart who seemed at point to drink;
And these the craftsman had not made to shrink
Though in the midst Diana's feet pressed down
The forest greensward, and her girded gown
Cleared from the brambles fell about her thigh,
And eager showed her terrible bright eye.
But 'twixt the pillars and that marvellous thing
Were scattered those they had e'en now heard sing;
Their song had sunk now, and a murmuring voice,
But mingled with the clicking loom's sharp noise
And splashing of the fountain, where a maid
With one hand lightly on a brass deer laid,
One clasped about her own foot, knelt to watch
Her brazen jar the tinkling water catch;
Withal the wool-comb's sound within the fleece
Began and grew, and slowly did decrease,
And then began as still it gat new food;
And by the loom an ancient woman stood
And grumbled o'er the web; and on the floor
Ten spindles twisted ever; from the store
Raised on high pillars at the gable end,
Adown a steep stair did a maiden wend,
Who in the wide folds of her gathered gown
Fresh yarn bright-dyed unto the loom bare down.

But on the downy cushions of a throne,
Above all this sat the fair Queen alone,
Who heeded not the work, nor noted aught;
Nor showed indeed that there was any thought
Within her heaving breast; but though she moved
No whit the limbs a God might well have loved,
Although her mouth was as of one who lies
In peaceful sleep; though over her deep eyes
No shadow came to trouble her white brow,
Yet might you deem no rest was on her now;
Rather too weary seemed she e'en to sigh
For foolish life that joyless passed her by.

So thus the King Bellerophon led in
Just as the old song did once more begin
From the slim maids, that by the loom's side spun;
But ere it had full sway, the nighest one
Unto the door stopped singing suddenly,
And pressed her neighbour's arm, that she might see
What new folk were come in; and therewithal
An angry glance from the Queen's eyes did fall
Upon the maid; so that Bellerophon
A cruel visage had to look upon,
When first he saw the Queen raised high above
The ordered tresses of that close of love.
But when the women knew the King indeed
They did him reverence, and with lowly heed
Made way for him, while a girl here and there
Made haste to hide what labour had made bare
Of limb or breast; and the King smiled through all,
And now and then a wandering glance let fall
Upon some fairest face; and so at last
Through the sweet band unto the Queen they passed,
Who rose and waited them by her fair throne
With eyes wherefrom all care once more had gone
Of life and what it brought: then the King said—
"O Sthenobœa, hither have I led
A man, who, from a happy life down-hurled,
Looks with sick eyes upon this happy world;
Not knowing how to stay here or depart:
Thou know'st and I know how the wounded heart
Forgetteth pain and groweth whole again,
Yet is the pain that passeth no less pain.
"But since this man is noble even as we,
And help begets help, and withal to me
Worthy he seems to be a great king's friend,
Now help me to begin to make an end
Of his so heavy mood; for though indeed
This daintiness may nowise help his need,
Yet may kind words avail to make him kind
Unto himself; kind eyes may make him blind
Unto the ugly, tangled whirl of life;
Or in some measured image of real strife
He may forget the things that he has lost,
Nor think of how he needs must yet be tost
Like other men from wave to wave of fate."

Gravely she set herself the end to wait
Of the King's speech; and what of scorn might be
Within her heart changed nowise outwardly
Her eyes that looked with scorn on everything;
And yet withal while still the cheery King
Let his tale flow, unto the exile's place
She glanced with scornful wonder at his face
At first, because she deemed it soft and kind;
Yet was he fair, and she—she needs must find
Something that drew her to his wide grey eyes;
And presently as with some great surprise
Her heart 'gan beat, and she must strive in vain
To crush within it a sweet rising pain,
She deemed to be that pity that she knew
As the last folly wise folk turn unto.
For pain was wont to rouse her rage, and she
Was like those beasts that slaughter cruelly
Their wounded fellows—truth she knew not of,
And fain had killed folk babbling over love;
Justice she thought of as a thing that might
Balk some desire of hers, before the night
Of death should end it all: nor hope she knew,
Nor what fear was, how ill soe'er life grew.
This wisdom had she more than most of folk,
That through the painted cloud of lies she broke
To gain what brought her pleasure for awhile,
However men might call it nought and vile;
Nor was she one to make a piteous groan
O'er bitter pain amidst her pleasure grown.

But she was one of those wrought by the gods
To be to foolish men as sharpest rods
To scourge their folly; wrought so daintily
That scarcely could a man her body see
Without awaking strife 'twixt good and ill
Within him; and her sweet, soft voice would fill
Men's hearts with strange desires, and her great eyes,
Truthful to show her to the cold and wise
E'en as she was, would make some cast aside
Whatever wisdom in their breasts might hide,
And still despite what long ill days might prove,
They called her languid hate the soul of love.

But now that fire that to her eyes arose
She cast aback awhile to lie all close
About her heart; her full lips trembled not,
And from her cheek faded the crimson spot
That erst increased thereon.
"O Prince," she said,
"Strive to get back again thy goodlihead;
Life flitteth fast, and while it still abides,
Our folly many a good thing from us hides,
That else would pierce our hearts with its delight
Unto the quick, in all the Gods' despite."

He gazed upon her wondering, for again
That new-born hope, that sweet and bitter pain,
Flushed her smooth cheek, and glittered in her eyes,
And wrought within her lips; yet was she wise,
And gazing on his pale and wondering face,
In his frank eyes she did not fail to trace
A trouble like unto a growing hate,
That, yet unknown to him, her love did wait;
Then once more did she smother up that flame,
Calm grew she; from her lips a false voice came:

"Yea, and bethink thee, mayst thou not be born
To raise the crushed and succour the forlorn,
And in the place of sorrow to set mirth,
Gaining a great name through the wondering earth?
Now surely has my lord the King done well
To bring thee here thy tale to me to tell;
Come, then, for nearby such a bower there is
As most men deem to be a place of bliss;
There, when thy tale is o'er that I am fain
To hearken, may sweet music ease thy pain
Amidst our feast; or of these maids shall one
Read of some piteous thing the Gods have done
To us poor folk upon the earth that dwell.
Yea, and the reader will I choose so well,
That such an one herself shall seem to be
As she of whom the tale tells piteously.
And thou shalt hear when all is past and o'er,
And with its sorrow still thine heart is sore,
The Lydian flutes come nigher and more nigh,
Till glittering raiment cometh presently,
And thou behold'st the dance of the slim girls,
Wavering and strange as the leaf-wreath that whirls
Down in the marble court we walk in here
Mid sad October, when the rain draws near:
So delicate therewith, that when all sound
Of sobbing flute has left the air around,
And, panting, lean the dancers against wall
And well-wrought pillar, you hear nought at all
But their deep breathing, so are all men stilled,
So full their hearts with all that beauty filled."

Coldly and falsely was her speech begun,
But she waxed warm ere all the tale was done;
Nay, something soft was in her voice at last,
As round his soul her net she strove to cast
Almost despite herself.
Unmoved he stood,
But that some thought did cross his weary mood
That made him knit his brow, and therewith came
A flush across his face as if of shame
Because of that new thought; but when an end
Her speech had, then he spake:
"What love or friend
Can do me good? God-hated shall I be,
And bring to no man aught but misery;
And thou, O royal man, and thou, O Queen,
Who heretofore in bliss and mirth have been,
Hearken my words, and on your heads be all
The trouble that from me shall surely fall
If I abide with you: yet doubt it not
That this your love shall never be forgot
Wherewith ye strive to win a helpless man,
And ever will I labour as I can
To make my ill forebodings come to nought."

But midst these things, pleased by some hidden thought,
The King smiled, turning curious eyes on them,
And smoothing down his raiment's golden hem
As one who hearkens music; then said he,
"Wilt thou give word for our festivity,
O Sthenobœa? But come thou, O guest,
And by the great sea we will take our rest,
Speaking few words."
So from her golden throne
She passed to do what things must needs be done,
And with firm feet amidst her maids she went
On this new tyrannous sweetness all intent;
So did it work in her, that scarcely she
Might bear the world now, as she turned to see
The stranger and the King a-going down
By marble stairs unto the foreshores brown.
So slipped the morn away; and when the sun
His downward course some three hours had begun,
Summoned by sound of horns they took their way
Unto a bower that looking westward lay,
Yet was by trellised roses shaded so
That little of the hot sun did it know
But what the lime-trees' honey-sweet scent told,
And their wide wind-stirred leaves, turned into gold
Against the bright rays of the afternoon.

So to that chamber came the fair Queen soon,
Well harbingered by flutes; nor had she spared
To veil her limbs in raiment that had fared
O'er many a sea, before it had the hap
The Lycian's smooth skin in its folds to lap.
But as she entered there in queenly guise,
With firm and haughty step, and careless eyes
Over the half-hid beauty of her breast,
One moment on the exile did they rest,
And softened to a meek, imploring gaze—
One moment only; as with great amaze
His eyes beheld her, doubtful what was there,
All had gone thence, but the proud empty stare
That she was wont to turn on everything.
Withal she sat her down beside the King,
And the feast passed with much of such delight
As makes to happy men the world seem bright,
But from the hapless draws but hate and scorn,
Because the Gods both happy and forlorn
Have set in one world, each to each to be
A vain rebuke, a bitter memory.
Yet the Queen held her word, and when that they
Had heard the music sing adown the day,
After the dancing women had but left
Sweet honeyed scents behind, or roses, reft
By their own hands from head or middle small,
Then came with hurried steps into the hall
The reader and her scroll; sweet-eyed was she,
And timid as some loving memory
Midst the world's clamour: clad in gown of wool
She sat herself adown upon a stool
Anigh the proud feet of the Lycian Queen,

And straight, as if no soul she there had seen,
With slender hand put back her golden hair,
And 'gan to read from off the parchment fair.
In a low voice, and trembling at the first,
She read a tale of lovers' lives accurst
By cruel Gods and careless foolish men:
Like dainty music was her voice, and when
From out her heart she sighed, as she must read
Of folk unholpen in their utmost need,
Still must the stranger turn kind eyes on her.
At last awhile she paused, as she drew near
The bitter end of spilt and wasted bliss,
And death unblessed at last by any kiss;
Her voice failed, and adown her book did sink,
And midst them all awhile she seemed to think
Of the past days herself; but still so much
Her beauty and the tale their hearts did touch,
Folk held their breath till she began again,
And something 'twixt a pleasure and a pain
It was when all the sweet tale was read o'er
And her voice quivered through the air no more.
Then round the maiden's neck King Prœtus cast
A golden chain, and from the hall she passed,
And yet confused and shamefaced; for the Queen,
Who at the first the Prince's eyes had seen
Upon the maid, and then would look no more,
But kept her eyes fixed on the marble floor
As listening to the tale, her head now raised,
And with cold scorn upon the maiden gazed
As she bent down the golden gift to take;
And meanwhile, for her tender beauty's sake,
Over the exile's face a pleased smile came.

But she departed to the bliss or shame
Life had for her, and all folk left the bower;
For now was come the summer night's mid-hour:
The great high moon that lit the rippling sea
'Twixt the thin linden-trees shone doubtfully
Upon the dim grey garden; the sea-breeze
Stooped down on the pleached alleys; the tall trees
Over the long roofs moved their whispering leaves
Nor woke the dusky swifts beneath the eaves.

Now from that fair night wore the time away,
Until with lapse of many a quiet day,
And stirring times withal, Bellerophon
To love of life and hope of joy was won.
Still grave and wise he was beyond his years,
No eager man among his joyous peers
To snatch at pleasure; careful not to cheat
His soul with vain desires all over sweet;
A wary walker on the road of life;
E'en as a man who in a garden, rife
With flowers, has gone unarmed, and found that there
Are evil things amid the blossoms fair,
And paid with wounds for folly: yet when he
Is whole once more, since there he needs must be,
And has no will its sweets to cast aside,
Well armed he walks there ware of beasts that hide
Beneath the shade of those vine-trellises.
Amid the grey stems of the apple-trees.

Yet at his heart, about the root of it
Strange thoughts there lay, which at sweet times would flit
Before his eyes, as things grown palpable;
Strange hopes that made the weltering world seem well
While he abode there: therefore was he kind
To man and maid, and all men's hearts did bind
With bonds of love, for mid the struggling folk,
The forgers and the bearers of the yoke,
Weary with wronging and with wrongs, he seemed
As one on whom a light from heaven had beamed,
That changed him to a god, yet being alive.
But midst all folk there did King Prœtus give
Great gifts to him; great trust in him he had,
And ever by his sight was he made glad:
For well did all things prosper in his hand,
Nor was there such another in the land
For strength or goodliness.
Now so it was,
That he on matters of the King would pass
About the country here and there, nor dwell
At Argos much, and that thing pleased him well;
For while all else grew better, ye shall know
That greater in his heart the fear did grow
That sprung up therein on that summer eve;
And though sometimes the Queen would make believe
To heed him nought—yea, or depart maybe
At whiles, when he the King would come to see—
Yet was this but at whiles; the next day came,
And scarce would she hold parley with her shame.
One noon of the late autumn, when the sun
Brightened the parting year, so nearly done,
With rays as hot as early June might shed,
Dawn past an hour, upon the tulip-bed,
In the great pleasance, 'neath a wall of yew,
Walked the Corinthian, pondering what to do
In some great matter late given unto him.
So clad he was, that both on breast and limb
Steel glittered, though his head as yet was bare,
But in his face was just so much of care
As seemed to show he had got that to do
He feared but little well to carry through,
But which must have his heed a little while:
And still in going would he stop and smile,

And seem to cast the shreds of thought away
In honour of the bright fresh autumn day
And all the pleasure of the lovely place.
But at the last, turning about his face
Unto the sunny garden's other side,
He saw where, down a grassy path and wide,
The Queen came, with her head bent down to earth,
As though mid thoughts she were that slew her mirth;
Slowly she went, with two maids following her,
Who in their delicate slim hands did bear,
The one a cithern and some verse-book old,
The other a white osier maund, to hold
Some of such flowers as still in fear and doubt
Against the sickness of the year held out.
But as they went, nigh to the Prince they drew,
And soon the maidens' eyes his beauty knew,
And one at other glanced, smiling and glad,
For soft love of him in their hearts they had;
Yet nought they said, nor did the Queen turn round,
But kept her eyes still bent upon the ground.
So in their walk they came to where there stood
A thin-leaved apple-tree, where, red as blood,
Yellow as gold, a little fruit hung yet,
The last rays of the fainting sun to get;
And a tall clump of autumn flowers, cold-grey,
Beneath it, mocked the promise of the day,
And to them clung a hapless bee or twain,
A butterfly spread languid wings in vain
Unto the sun, that scarce could heat her now.
There the Queen stayed awhile her footsteps slow,
And to the flowers wandered her slender hand;
But with her eyes cast down she still did stand,
And pondered.
Full of melody and peace
About her was the lingering year's decease;
Strange spicy scents there were that yet were sweet,
Green was the grass about her gold-shod feet,
And had no memory of the dawn's white rime;
Loud was the birds' song in that windless time,
Strange the sharp crying of the missel-thrush
Within the close heart of the hawthorn-bush,
Strange the far-off rooks' sweet tumultuous voice
That in the high elms e'en now must rejoice
And know not why—peace e'en if end of peace.
The while her burning heart did never cease
To give words to such longings, as she knew
To swift destruction all her glory drew.
"Ah! mine, mine, mine!" she thought, "ah! mine a while!
Ah! mine a little day, if all be vile
That coming years can bring unto my heart!
Ah! mine this eve, if we to-morn must part!
Mine, that a sweet hour I may know at last
How soon soever all delight is passed!
Ah! mine, mine, mine, if for a little while!"

So stood she, that her parted lips did smile
As if of one that memories make half sad,
Her breast heaved, as no stronger wish she had
Than for some careless lover, lightly won,
And soon forgot, to lay his lips thereon;
The flower-stem that her finger-tips did hold
Was crushed not, and within her shoe of gold
Lightly her foot was laid upon the grass;
No tremors through her dainty limbs did pass,
And healthy life alone did paint her cheek:
For if indeed at first she had felt weak,
Ere well she knew what she was bent upon,
Now at the last, when every doubt was gone,
She would not show the net unto the prey
Until she deemed that in her toils he lay.

She raised her eyes at last with a light sigh;
Despite herself, a flush passed suddenly
Over her face, and then all pale she grew;
For now withal Bellerophon she knew,
Though at that very point of time the sun
Along his upraised steel-clad arm had run,
And made an earthly sun that dazzled her.
Yet cast she back her trembling hope and fear
Into her heart, and as before she went
Slowly, with head a little downward bent,
But when she had gone on a few yards space,
Once more unto the Prince she raised her face;
Then stopped again, and turning round, she said,
From lips wherein all passion now seemed dead:
"Damsels, get home again; thou, Mysian, go
Unto the little treasury thou dost know
Anigh my bower, and taking this gold key,
Draw forth that ancient prophet's book for me
Which shows the stars: for that I fain would show
To Prince Bellerophon, who bides me now
E'er he goes forth to bring the island folk
Once more beneath King Prœtus' equal yoke.
And thou, Leucippe, bide our coming there,
And bid our folk set forth a feast as fair
As may be done; for we within a while
May need thy cithern dull thoughts to beguile."

E'en as they turned she passed on carelessly
Unto the Prince, nor looked aback to see
That they were gone; but he indeed had heard
Through the calm air her clearly-spoken word,
And saw the maidens go, and felt as one
Who bideth, when the herald's speech is done,
The word that bids the grinded spears fall down.
But she, with slim hand folded in her gown,
Went o'er the dewy grass to where he stood,
And in despite the fire within her blood
Was calm, and smiled on him, till nigh he thought
That surely all his fear was vain and nought.
He bowed before her as she drew anear,

But she held out her right hand, and in clear
Sweet tones she cried, "O fair Bellerophon,
Would that the victory were already won,
And thou wert back again at this thy home
We have made glad for thee: behold! I come
To say farewell—yet come a little way—
For something else indeed I had to say."

And still she held his hand, but yet durst not
Clasp as she would the treasure she had got.
Then to a place together did they pass,
Where yew-trees hemmed around a plot of grass,
And kept it scarce touched by the faint sun's rays—
A place well made for burning summer days,
But cheerless now. There on a marble seat
She bade him sit; while she with restless feet
Paced to and fro, while from the yew-twigs close,
With his scared cry the creeping blackbird rose.
But he, with eyes cast down upon the ground,
Deemed that his battle easier would be found
Than this.
And so at last she stayed by him
And cried: "The cup is full unto the brim;
For now thou goest where thou mayst be slain:
I speak then—and, alas! I speak in vain—
Thy cold eyes tell me so—How shall I move
Thy flinty heart my curse has made me love?
For what have other women done, when they
Were fair as I, and love before them lay?
Was not a look enough for them, a word
Low murmured, midst the hum of men scarce heard?
What have I left undone that they have done?
What askest thou of me, O heart of stone?"

Choked by her passion here awhile she stayed,
And he from off the bench sprang up dismayed,
And turned on her to speak; but she withal
Before him on her knees made haste to fall,
And cried out loud and shrilly: "Nay, nay, nay—
Say not the word thou art about to say;
Let me depart, and things be still as now;
So that my dreams sweet images may show,
As they have done—that waking I may think,
'If he, my love, from looks of love did shrink,
That was because I had not prayed him then
To be my love alone of living men;
Because he did not know that I, a Queen,
Who hitherto but loveless life have seen,
Could kneel to him, and pray upon my knees
To give me my first pleasure, my first peace'—
Thou knewest not—nay, nay, thou know'st not now—
Thou with the angry eyes and bended brow!—
Surely I talk my mother-tongue no more,
Therefore thou knowest not that I implore
Thy pity, that I give myself to thee,
Thy love, thy slave, thy castaway to be—
Hear'st thou? thy castaway! when in a while
Thou growest weary of my loving smile!
Oh, take me, madman! In a year or twain
I will not thwart thee if thou lov'st again,
Nor eye thee sourly when thou growest cold;
—Or art thou not the man that men call bold,
And fear'st thou? Then what better time than this
For we twain to begin our life of bliss?
Thy keel awaits thee, and to thee alone,
Not to the wretched dastard on the throne,
Thy men will hearken—Nay, thou shalt not speak,
My feeble reed of hope thou shalt not break!—
Let me be gone, thou knowest not of love,
Thou semblance of a man that nought can move!
O wise, wise man, I give thee good farewell:
Gather fresh wisdom, thinking of my hell."

She sprang up to her feet and turned away
Trembling, and no word to her could he say
For grief and pity; and the Queen did go
A little way with doubtful steps and slow,
Then turned about, and once again did stand
Before his troubled face, hand laid in hand,
And sobbing now as if her heart would break;
But when from his grieved soul he fain would speak,
Again from midst her tears she cried, "No, no—
Do I not know what thou wouldst bid me do?
And yet forgive me!—thou art wise and good.
Surely some evil thing has turned my blood,
That even now I wished that thing to slay
That I of all things only till this day
Have loved. Ah, surely thou wilt not be slain!
Come back, and I will tell thee once again
How much I love thee, and will not forget
To say such things as might have moved thee yet,
Could I have told thee now, couldst thou have seen
These lips that love thee as they might have been.
—Farewell, I durst not pray thee for one kiss!"

Nearer she drew to him as she spake this,
Yet, when she ended, turned about again,
And still, as hoping all was not in vain,
Lingered a little while, and then at last,
With raging heart, swiftly therefrom she passed.

But, she clean vanished now, Bellerophon
Went slowly toward the palace, all alone,
And pondering on these things: and shamed he felt,
E'en as a just man who in sleep has dealt
Unjustly; nor had all her prayers and tears
Moved love in him, but rather stirred his fears,
For ever was he wise among wise men;
And though he doubted not her longing, when
She turned and spake soft words, he knew that she
So spake midst hope of what things yet might be,

And yet had left another kind of word,
Whereby a friendless man might well be feared;
Lonely he felt thereat, as one accurst,
With whom all best things still must turn to worst,
And e'en sweet love curdle to bitter hate.
Yet was he one not lightly crushed by fate.
And when at last he had his helmet on,
And heard the folk cry out "Bellerophon!"
As toward the ship he passed, kind the world seemed,
Nor love so far away indeed he deemed
When he some gentle maiden's kind grey eyes
Fixed on his own he did at whiles surprise,
Or when his godlike eyes, on some maid turned
More fair than most, set fire to thoughts that burned
On breast and brow of her. So forth he passed,
And reached the border of the sea at last,
And there took ship, and hence is gone a space.

But for the Queen, when she had left that place,
About the pleasance paths did she go still,
So 'wildered in her mind because her will
Might not be done, that at the first she knew
No more what place she might be passing through
Than one who walks in sleep. Yet hope and shame,
Twain help, at last unto her spirit came;
Yea, her bright gown, soiled with the autumn grass,
Told her the tale of what had come to pass,
And to her heart came hatred of the spot
Where she had kneeled to one who loved her not,
And even therewith his image did she see
As he had been; then cried she furiously:
"Ah, fool! ah, traitor! must I love thee then,
When in the world there are so many men
My smile would drive to madness?—for I know
What things they are that men desire so,
And which of all these bear I not with me?
Hast thou not heart and eyes to feel and see?
Then shalt thou die, then shalt thou die, at least,
Nor sit without me at life's glorious feast,
While I fall ever unto worse and worse—
Ah me! I rave!—what folly now to curse
That which I love, because its loveliness
Alone has brought me unto this distress!
I know not right nor wrong, but yet through all
Know that the gods a just man him would call;
Nay, and I knew it, when I saw him first,
And in my heart sprang up that glorious thirst—
And should he, not being base, yield suddenly,
And as the basest man, not loving me,
Take all I gave him, and cast all his life
Into a tangled and dishonoured strife?
Nay, it could never be—but now, indeed,
Somewhat with pity of me his heart may bleed,
Since he is good; and he shall think of me,
And day by day and night by night shall see
The image of that woman on her knees,
Whom men here liken to the goddesses.
And certainly shall he come back again:
Nor shall my next speech to him be so vain."

She smiled, and toward the house made swiftly on
In triumph, even as though the game were won:
For, now his face was gone, she, blind with love,
Deemed but his honour she had got to move
From its high place, before his heart should fall
A prey unto her; e'en as when the wall
By many a stroke of stones is battered down,
And all may work their will upon the town.

Now of Bellerophon must it be said
That, what by wisdom, what by hardihead,
His task was done, and great praise gained thereby;
So he at last, midst shouts and minstrelsy,
In the first days of spring, passed up once more
Unto the palace from the thronging shore.
Him Prœtus met half-way, and, in the face
Of all the people, in a straight embrace
Held him awhile, and called him his dear son,
Praising the Gods for all that he had done;
Then hand in hand did they go up the street,
And on their heads folk cast the spring-flowers sweet,
And bands of maids met them with joyous song
And gracious pageants as they went along:
And all this for the brave Corinthian's sake—
Such joy did his return in all hearts make.

But though the man, once from his home driven forth,
Was so much loved and held of so much worth,
And though he throve thereby, and seemed to be
Scarcely a man, but some divinity
To people's eyes, yet in his soul no less
There lingered still a little heaviness,
And therefrom hardly could he cast away
The memory of that sunny autumn day
And of the fear it brought; and one more fear
He had besides, and as they drew anear
The palace, therewith somewhat faltering,
He needs must turn a while, and of the King
Ask how the Lycian fared: the King laughed low,
And said:
"Nay, surely she is well enow,
As her wont is to be, for, sooth to say,
She for herself is ever wont to pray,
And heedeth nothing other grief and wrong:
And be thou sure, my son, that such live long
And lead sweet lives; but those who ever think
How he and she may fare, and still must shrink
From sweeping any foe from out the way.
These—living other people's lives, I say,

Besides their own, and most of them forlorn—
May hap to find their lives of comfort shorn
And short enow—let pass, for as to me,
I weep for others' troubles certainly,
But for mine own would weep a little more;
And so I jog on somehow to the shore
Whence I shall not return— Thou laughest—well,
I deem I was not made for heaven or hell,
But simply for the earth; but thou, O son,
I deem of heaven, and all hearts hast thou won—
Yea, and this morn the Queen is merrier,
Because she knoweth that thou art anear."

The Prince smiled at his words and gladder felt,
Yet somewhat of his old fear by him dwelt
And shamed him midst his honour. But withal,
With shouts and music, entered they the hall,
And there great feast was made; but ere the night
Had 'gun to put an end to men's delight,
A maid came up the hall with hurrying feet,
And there in lowly wise the King did greet,
And bid him know that Sthenobœa had will
The joyance of that high-tide to fulfil,
And Prince Bellerophon to welcome home;
And even as she spoke the Queen was come
Unto the door, and through the hall she passed,
And round about her ever looks she cast,
As though her maidens, howsoever fair
And lovesome unto common eyes they were,
Were fashioned in another wise than she,
They made for time, she for eternity;
So 'twixt the awed and wondering folk she moved,
Hapless and proud, glorious and unbeloved,
And hating all folk but her love alone:
And he a shadow seemed, one moment shown
Unto her longing eyes, then snatched away
Ere yet her heart could win one glorious day.
Cruel and happy was she deemed of men—
Cruel she was, but though tormented then
By love, still happier than she ere had been.
Now when she saw the Prince, with such-like mien
She greeted him but as a Queen might greet
Her husband's friend fresh from a glorious feat;
Frank-seeming were her words, and in her face
No sign of all that storm the Prince could trace
That had swept over her—and yet therefore
Amidst his joy he did but fear her more.

So time slipped by, and still was she the same,
Till he 'gan deem she had forgot the shame
Of having shameful gifts cast back to her,
That scorned love was a burden light to bear.
Yea, and the moody ways that once she had
Seemed changing into life all frank and glad;
She saw him oft now, and alone at whiles;
But still, despite her kind words and her smiles
No word of love fell from her any more.
But when the lush green spring was now passed o'er,
And the green lily-buds were growing white,
A feast they held for pastime and delight
Within the odorous pleasance on a tide,
And down the hours the feast in joy did glide.
Venus they worshipped there, her image shone
Above the folk from thoughts of hard life won;
About her went the girls in ordered bands,
And scattered flowers from out their flowery hands,
And with their eager voices, sweet but shrill,
Betwixt the o'erladen trees the air did fill;
Or, careless what their dainty limbs might meet,
Ungirded and unshod, with hurrying feet,
Mocked cold Diana's race betwixt the trees,
Where the long grass and sorrel kissed their knees,
About the borders of the neighbouring field;
Or in the garden were content to yield
Unto the sun, and by the fountain-side,
Panting, love's growing languor would abide.
Surely the Goddess in the warm wind breathed,
Surely her fingers wrought the flowers that wreathed
The painted trellises—some added grace
Her spirit gave to every limb and face,
Some added scent to raiment long laid hid
Beneath the stained chest's carven cypress lid;
Fairer the girdle round the warm side clung,
Fairer the dainty folds beneath it hung,
Fairer the gold upon the bosom lay
Than was their wont ere that bewildering day;
When fear and shame, twin rulers of the earth,
Sat hoodwinked in the maze of short-lived mirth.
Songs cleft the air, and little words therein
Were clean changed now, and told of honeyed sin,
And passionate words seemed fire, and words, that had
Grave meaning once, were changed, and only bade
The listeners' hearts to thoughts they could not name.
Shame changed to strong desire, desire seemed shame
And trembled; and such words the lover heard
As in the middle of the night afeard
He once was wont alone to whisper low
Unto himself, for fear the day should know
What his love really was; the longing eyes
That unabashed were wont to make arise
The blush of shame to bosom and grave brow,
Beholding all their fill, were downcast now;
The eager heart shrank back, the cold was moved,
Wooed was the wooer, the lover was beloved.

But yet indeed from wise Bellerophon
Right little by Queen Venus' wiles was won:
Joyous he was, but nowise would forget
That long and changing might his life be yet,
Nor deemed he had to do with such things now,
So let all pass, e'en as a painted show.
But the Queen hoped belike, and many a prayer
That morn had made to Venus' image fair;
And as the day wore, hushed she grew at whiles
And pale; and sick and scornful were her smiles,
Nor knew her heart what words her lips might say

So through its changing hours went by the day,
And when at last they sang the sun a-down,
And, singing, watched the moon rise, and the town
Was babbling through the clear eve, saddened now;
When faint and weary went, with footsteps slow,
The lover and beloved, to e'en such rest
As they might win; and soon the daisies, pressed
By oft-kissed dainty feet and panting side,
Now with the dew were growing satisfied,
And sick blind passion now no more might spoil
The place made beautiful by patient toil
Of many a man. And now Bellerophon
Slept light and sweetly as the night wore on,
Nor dreamed about the morrow; but the Queen
Rose from her bed, and, like a sin unseen,
Stole from the house, and, barefoot as she was,
Through the dark belt of whispering trees did pass
That girt the fair feast's pleasant place around:
And when she came unto that spot of ground
Whereas she deemed Bellerophon had lain,
Then low adown she lay, and as for pain
She moaned, and on the dew she laid her cheek,
Then raised her head and cried:

"Now may I speak,
Now may I speak, since none can hear me now
But thou, O Love, thou of the bitter bow.
Didst thou not see, O Citheræa's son,
Thine image, that men call Bellerophon?
Thine image, with the heart of stone, the eyes
Of fire, those forgers of all miseries?
And shall I bear thy burden all alone,
In silent places making my low moan?
Nay, but once more I try it—help thou me,
Or on the earth a strange deed shalt thou see.
Lo, now! thou knowest what my will has been:
Day after day his fair face have I seen
And made no sign—thus had I won him soon.
But thou, the dreadful sun, the cruel moon,
The scents, the flowers, the half-veiled nakedness
Of wanton girls, my heart did so oppress
That now the chain is broken—Didst thou see
How when he turned his cruel face on me
He laughed?—he laughed, nor would behold my heart—
He laughed, to think at last he had a part
In joyous life without me: here, e'en here,
He drank, rejoicing much, still drawing near,
As the fool thought, to riches and renown.
And such an one wilt thou not cast adown
When thou rememberest how he came to me
With wan worn cheek?—Ah, sweet he was to see
I loved him then—how can I love him now,
So changed, so changed?

"But thou—what doest thou?
Hast thou forgotten how thy temples stand,
Made rich with gifts, in many a luckless land?
Hast thou forgotten what strange rites are done
To gain thy goodwill underneath the sun?—
Thou art asleep, then! Wake!—the world will end
Because thou sleepest—e'en now doth it wend
Unto the sickening end of all delights;
Black, black the days are, dull grey are the nights,
No more the night hides shame, no more the day
Unto the rose-strewn chamber lights the way;
And folk begin to curse thee, '*Love is gone,*
Grey shall the earth be, filled with rocks alone,
Because the generations shall die out;
Grey shall the earth be, lonely, wrapped about
With cloudy memories of the moans of men.'
Thus, thus they curse. Shall I not curse thee then,
Thou who tormentest me and leav'st me lone,
Nor thinkest once of all that thou hast done?—
Spare me! What cruel God taught men to speak,
To cast forth words that for all good are weak
And strong for all undoing?—thou know'st this,
O lovely one! take not all hope of bliss
Away from me, because my eager prayer
Grows like unto a curse. O great and fair,
Hearken a little, for to-morn must I
Speak once again of love to him, or die;
Hast thou no dream to send him, such as thou
Hast shown to me so many a time or now?
Wilt thou not make him weep without a cause,
As I have done, as sleep her dark veil draws
From off his head? or his awaking meet
With lovely images, so soft and sweet,
That they, forgotten quite, yet leave behind
Great yearning for bright eyes and touches kind?
Alas, alas! wilt thou not change mine eyes,
Or else blind his, the cold, the over-wise?
O Love, he knows my heart, and what it is—
No fool he is to cast away his bliss
On such as me: nay, rather he will take
Some grey-eyed girl to love him for his sake,
Not for her own—he knows me, and therefore
I, grovelling here where he has lain, the more
Must burn for him—he knows me; and thou, too,
Better than I, knowest what I shall do.
O Love, thou knowest all, yet since I live
A little joyance hope to me doth give;
Wilt thou not grant me now some sign, O Love?

Wilt thou not redden this dark sky, or move
Those stark hard walls, or make the spotted thrush
Cry as in morn through this dark scented hush?"

She ceased, and leaned back, kneeling, and all spent
And panting, with her trembling fingers rent
The linen from her breast, and, with shut eyes,
Waited awhile as for some great surprise,
But yet heard nothing stranger or more loud
Than the leaves' rustle; a long bank of cloud
Lay in the south, low down, and scarcely seen
'Gainst the grey sky; and when at last the Queen
Opened her eyes, she started eagerly,
Although the strangest thing her eyes could see
Was but the summer lightning playing there:
Then she put back her over-hanging hair,
And in a hard and grating voice she said:
"O Sthenobœa, art thou then afraid
Of a god's presence?—did a god e'er come
To help a good and just man when his home
Was turned to hell? I was but praying here
Unto myself, who to myself am dear
Alone of all things, mine own self to aid.
And therewithal I needs must grow afraid
E'en of myself—O wretch, unholpen still,
To-morrow early thou shalt surely fill
The measure of thy woe—and then—and then—
Alas for me! What cruellest man of men
Had made me this, and left me even thus?"

Unto the sky wild eyes and piteous
She turned, and gat unto her feet once more,
And, led by use, came back unto the door
Whence she went out, and with no stealthy tread,
Careless of all things, gat her to her bed,
And there at last, in grief and care's despite,
Slept till the world had long forgotten night.

Bellerophon arose the morrow morn
Unlike the man that once had been forlorn;
Bright-eyed and merry was he, and such fear
As yet clung round him did but make joy dear,
And more in hope he was, and knew not why,
Than any day that yet had passed him by.
Now ere the freshness of the morn had died,
Restless with happiness, he thought to ride
Unto a ship, that in a little bay
Anigh to Phlius, bound for outlands, lay;
Unto whose Phrygian master had the King
Given commands to buy him many a thing,
And soon he sailed, since fair was grown the wind.
But as Bellerophon in such a mind
Passed slow along the marble cloister-wall,
He heard a voice his name behind him call,
And turning, saw the Thracian maiden fair,
Leucippe, coming swiftly toward him there,
Who when she reached him stayed, and drawing breath
As one who rests, said, "Sir, my mistress saith
That she awhile is fain to speak with thee
Before thou goest down unto the sea;
And in her bower for thee doth she abide."
He gave her some light word, and side by side
The twain passed toward the bower, he all the while
Noting the Thracian with a well-pleased smile;
For his fear slept, or he felt strong enow
Things good and ill unto his will to bow.
Yet was the gentle Thracian pale that day,
And still she seemed as she some word would say
Unto him, that her lips durst not to frame;
And when unto the Queen's bower-door they came,
And he passed there, and it was shut on him,
She lingered still, and through her body slim
A tremour ran, her pale face waxed all red,
And her lips moved as though some word they said
She durst not utter loud; then she looked down
Upon her bare feet and her slave's wool gown,
And to her daily task straight took her way,

Now on his throne King Prœtus judged that day,
And heard things dull, things strange, but when at last
The summer noon now by an hour had passed,
He went to meat, and thought to see thereat
Bellerophon's frank face, who ever sat
At his right hand; but empty was his place.
And when the King, who fain had seen his face,
Asked whither he was gone, a certain man
Said: "King, I saw the brave Corinthian,
Two hours agone, pass through the outer door,
And in his face there seemed a trouble sore,
So that I needs must ask him what was wrong;
But staring at me as he went along,
Silent he passed, as if he heard me not;
Afoot he was, nor weapon had he got."
The King's face clouded, but the meal being done
In his fair chariot did he get him gone
Unto the haven, where the Phrygian ship
Was waiting his last word her ropes to slip.
Restless he was, and wished that night were come.
But ere he left the fair porch of his home,
Unto the Queen a messenger he sent,
And bade her know whereunto now he went,
And prayed her go with him; but presently
Back came the messenger, and said that she
Was ill at ease and in her bower would bide,
For scarcely she upon that day might ride.
So at that word of hers the Argive King
Went on his way, but somewhat muttering,
For heavy thoughts were gathering round his heart;
But when he came where, ready to depart,
The ship lay, with the bright-eyed master there
Some talk he had, who said the wind was fair

And all things ready; then the King said, "Friend,
To-morrow's noon I deem will make an end
Of this thy lingering; I will send to thee
A messenger to tell the certainty
Of my last wishes, who shall bring thee gold
And this same ring that now thou dost behold
Upon my finger, for a token sure—
Farewell, and may thy good days long endure."

He turned, but backward sent his eyes awhile,
Sighing, though on his lips there was a smile;
The half-raised sail that clung unto the mast,
The tinkling ripple 'gainst the black side cast,
The thin blue smoke that from the poop arose,
The northland dog that midst of ropes did doze,
The barefoot shipmen's eyes upon him bent,
Curious and half-defiant, as they went
About their work—all these things raised in him
Desire for roving—stirred up thoughts that, dim
At this time, clear at that, still oft he had,
That there his life was not so overglad;
And as toward Argos now he rode along
By the grey sea, the shipmen's broken song
Smote on his ear and with the low surf's fall
Mingled, and seemed to him perchance to call
To freedom and a life not lived in vain.

But even so his palace did he gain,
And the dull listless day slipped into night,
And smothering troublous thoughts e'en as he might,
Did he betake himself to bed, and there
Lay half-asleep beneath the tester fair,
Waiting until the low-voiced flutes gave sign
That thither drew the Lycian's feet divine—
For so the wont was, that she still was led
Unto her chamber as a bride new-wed.

Of that sweet sound nought heard the King at all,
But straightway into a short sleep did fall,
Then woke as one who knoweth certainly
That all the hours he now shall hear pass by,
Nor sleep until the sun is up again.
So, waking, did he hear a cry of pain
Within the chamber, and thereat adrad
He turned him round, and saw the Queen, so clad
That on her was her raiment richly wrought,
Yet in such case as though hard fate had brought
Some bane of kings into the royal place,
And with that far-removed and dainty grace
The rough hands of some outland foe had dealt;
For dragged athwart her was the jewelled belt,
Rent and disorded the Phœnician gown,
The linen from her shoulders dragged adown,
Her arms and glorious bosom made half-bare,
And furthermore such shameful signs were there,
As though not long past hands had there been laid
Heavier than touches of the tiring-maid.

So swiftly through the place from end to end
She paced, but yet stopped now and then to send
Low bitter moans forth on the scented air;
And through the King's heart shot a bitter fear,
Nor could he move—he had believed her cold,
And wise to draw herself from pleasure's hold
When it began to sting the heart—but now
What shameful thing would these last minutes show?

Now as she went a look askance she cast
Upon the King, and turning at the last,
With strange eyes drew anigh the royal bed,
And, with clasped hands, before him stood, and said:
"Thou wakest, then? thou wonderest at this sight?
I have a tale to tell to thee this night
I cannot utter, unless words are taught
Unto my lips to draw forth all my thought—
Thou wonderest at my words? Then ask, then ask!
The sooner will be done my heavy task."

Upright in bed the King sat, pale with doubt
And gathering fear; his right hand he stretched out
To take the Queen's hand, but aback she drew,
Shuddering; and half he deemed the truth he knew,
As o'er her pale face and her bosom came
Beneath his gaze a flush as if of shame:
"Wilt thou not speak, and make an end?" she cried.
Then he spake slowly, "Why dost thou abide
Without my bed to-night? why dost thou groan,
Whom I ere now no love-sick girl have known?"

She covered up her face at that last word;
The thick folds of her linen gown were stirred
As her limbs writhed beneath them—nought she said,
As though the word was not remembered
She had to say; and, loth the worst to hear,
The King awhile was tongue-tied by his fear.

At last the words came: "Thou bad'st ask of thee
Why thou to-night my playmate wouldst not be—
What hast thou done? Speak quickly of the thing!"

She drew her hands away, and cried, "O King,
Art thou awake yet, that this shameful guise
Seems nothing strange unto thy drowsy eyes,
Wilt thou not ask why this and this is torn?
Why this is bruised? Lo, since the long-passed morn

Thus have I sat, that thou e'en this might see,
And ask what madness there has been in me.
Thus have I sat, and cursed the God who made
The day so long, the night so long delayed.
"Ask! thou art happy that the Lycian sod
Unwearied oft my virgin feet have trod
From dawn to dusk; that in the Lycian wood
Before wild things untrembling I have stood;
That this right arm so oft the javelin threw—
These fingers rather the grey bowstring knew
Than the gold needle: even so, indeed,
Of more than woman's strength had I had need
If with a real man I had striven to-day;
But he who would have shamed thee went his way
Like a scourged woman—thou wilt spare him, then—
Lay down thy sword!—that is for manly men."

For while she spake, and in her eyes did burn
The fires of hate, the King's face had waxed stern,
And ere her bitter speech was fully o'er,
He had arisen, and from off the floor
Had gat his proven sword into his hand,
And eager by the trembling Queen did stand,
And cried, "Nay, hold! for surely I know well
What tale it is thy lips to-night would tell;
Therefore my sword befits me, the tried friend
That many a troublous thing has brought to end.
Yet fear not, for another friend have I
To help me deal with this new villany,
Even the godlike man Bellerophon;
So with one word thy heavy task is done.
—O Sthenobœa, speak the name of him
Who wrought this deed, then let that name wax dim
Within thy mind till it is dead and past;
For, certes, yesterday he saw the last
Of setting suns his doomed eyes shall behold."

Pale as a corpse she waxed, and stony cold
Amidst these words; silent awhile she was
After the last word from the King did pass,
But in a low voice at the last she said:
"Yea, for this deed of his must he be dead?
And must he be at peace, because he strove
To take from me honour, and peace, and love?
Must a great King do thus? or hast thou not
Some lightless place in mighty Argos got
Where nought can hap to break the memory
Of what he hoped in other days might be;
For great he hath been, and of noble birth
As any man who dwelleth on the earth.
—Thou hast forgotten that the dead shall rest,
Whate'er they wrought on earth of worst or best."

But the King gazed upon her gloomily,
And said, "Nay, nay;—the man shall surely die—
His hope die with him, is it not enow?
But no such mind I bear in me as thou,
Who speakest not as a great Queen should speak,
But rather as a girl made mad and weak
By hope delayed and love cast back again,
Who knoweth not her words are words and vain.
Content thee, thou art loved and honoured still—
Speak forth the name of him who wrought the ill,
For I am fain to meet Bellerophon,
So that we twain may do what must be done."

He spake, but mid the tumult of her mind
She heard him not, and deaf she was and blind
To all without, nor knew she if her feet
The marble cold or red-hot iron did meet.
She moved not and she felt not, but a sound
Came from her lips, and smote the air around
With slow hard words:
"Ah! thou hast named him then
Twice in this hour alone of earthly men;—
That same Bellerophon, that all folk love,
In manly wise this morn against me strove!"

Ah, how the world was changed, as she went by
The King, bewildered with new misery—
Ah, and how little time it was agone
When all that deed of hers was not yet done,
When yet she might have died for him, and made
A little love her lonely tomb to shade
Spring up within his heart—when hope there was
Of many a thing that yet might come to pass—
And now, and now—those spoken words must be
A part of her, an unwrought misery
That would not let her rest till all was o'er,—
Nay, nay, no rest upon the shadowy shore.

Slowly she left the chamber, none the less
With measured steps her feet the floor did press
As a Queen's should, nor fainted she at all,
But straight unto the door 'twixt wall and wall
She went, and still perchance had forced a smile
Had she met any one; and all the while
Set in such torment as men cannot name,
If she did think, wondered that still the same
Were all things round her as they had been erst—
That the house fell not—that the feet accurst
To carry her, yet left no sign in blood
Of where the wretchedest on earth had stood—
That round about her still her raiment clung—
That no great sudden pain her body stung,
No inward flame her false white limbs would burn,
Or into horror all her beauty turn—
That still the gentle sounds of night were there
As she had known them: the light summer air
Within the thick-leaved trees, as she passed by
Some open window, and the nightbird's cry
From far; the gnat's thin pipe about her head,

The wheeling moth delaying to be dead
Within the taper's flame—yea, certainly
Shall things about her as they have been be;
And even that a torment now has grown.

Yet must she reap the grain that she has sown;
No thought of turning back was in her heart,
No more in those past days can she have part:
Nay, when her glimmering bower she came unto,
She muttered through the dusk, "As I would do
So have I done—so would I do again."

Lo, thus in unimaginable pain
Leave we her now, and to the King turn back;
Who stood there overwhelmed by sudden lack
Of what he leaned on—with his life left bare
Of a great pleasure that was growing there.
A storm of rage swept through his heart, to think
That he of such a cup as this must drink;
For if he doubted aught, this was his doubt,
That all the tale was not told fully out—
That for Bellerophon the Queen's great scorn
And loathing was a thing but newly born—
That bitter hate was but a lover's hate,
Which even yet beneath the hand of fate
Might turn to hottest love. He groaned thereat,
And staggering back, upon the bed he sat;
His bright sword from his hand had fallen down
When that last dreadful word at him was thrown,
And now, with head sunk 'twixt his hands, he sought
Some outlet from the weary girth of thought
That hemmed him in.

"And must I slay him then,
Him whom I loved above all earthly men?
Behold, if now I slept here, and next morn,
Ere the day's memory should be fully born
From out of sleep, men came and said to me,
'Sire, the Corinthian draweth nigh to thee,'
My first thought would be joy that he had come.
And yet I am a King, nor shall my home
Become a brothel before all men's eyes.
He who drinks deadly poison surely dies;
And he hath drunk, and must abide the end.
Yet hath the image of him been my friend—
What shall I do? Not lightly can I bear
The voice of men about these things to hear;
'He trusted him, he thought himself right wise
To look into men's souls through lips and eyes—
—Behold the end!'— Yea, and most certainly
I will not bear once more his face to see;
Nor in the land where he was purified
Shall grass or marble by his blood be dyed,
Since he must go—green grew a bough of spring
Amidst the barren death of many a thing;
Not barren it, since poison fruits it bore—
Behold now, I, who loved my life of yore,
Begin to weary that I e'er was born;
But let it pass—rather let good men mourn;
Great men, the earth's salt, wear their lives away
In weeping for the ne'er-returning day:
For surely all is good enough for me.

"And yet alas! what truth there seemed in thee—
—What can I do? Might he not die in war?—
Nay, but at peace through him my borders are.
He shall not die here—the deep sea were good
To hide the story of his untamed blood—
Or, further—O thou fool, that so must make
My life so dull, e'en for a woman's sake!
There in that land, then, shall thy bones have rest
Beneath the sod her worshipped feet have pressed.
In Lycia shalt thou die; her father's hand
Shall draw the sword, or his lips give command
To make an end of thee—So shall it be,
And that swift Phrygian ready now for sea
Shall bear thee hence—Would I had known thee not!
A new pain hast thou been—a heavy lot
My life in early morn to me shall seem,
When I have dreamed that all was but a dream,
And waked to truth again and lonely life.

"Let be; now must I forge the hidden knife
Against thee, and I would the thing were done.
Thou may'st not die so; thou art such an one
As the gods love, whatever thou mayst do,
Perchance they pay small heed to false or true
In such as we are. But the lamps burn low,
The night wears, grey the eastern sky doth grow;
I must forget thee; fellow, fare thee well,
Who might have turned my feet from lonely hell!"

So saying, slowly, as a man who needs
Must do a deed that woe and evil breeds,
He rose, and took his writing tools to him
And ere the day had made the tapers dim,
Two letters with his own hand had he made.
And open was the first one, and it said
These words:

Unto the wise Bellerophon—
To Lycia the Gods call thee, O my son;
So when thou hast this letter in thine hand,
Abide no longer in the Argive land
Than if thou fleddest some avenging man,
But make good speed to that swift Phrygian
Who for the southlands saileth this same day.
Take thou this gold for furtherance and stay,
And this for his reward who rules the keel,
And for a token show him this my seal.
This casket to the Lycian king bear forth,
That hath in it a thing of greatest worth;
And let no hand be laid on it but thine
Till in Jobates' hands its gold doth shine.
Then bid him mind how that he had of me
When last I saw his face the fellow key
To that which in mine hands doth open it—

Awhile the King had stayed when this was writ,
And on the gathering greyness of the morn
Long fixed his eyes, unseeing and forlorn,
Then o'er the paper moved his hand again.

Mayst thou do well among these outland men.
Perchance my face thou never more shalt see,
Perchance but little more remains to thee
Of thy loved life—thou wert not one to cry
Curses on all because life passeth by.
If woe befalls thee there, think none the less
That I erewhile have wrought thee happiness;
Farewell! and ask thou not to see me first:
Life worsens here, and ere it reach the worst,
Unto the Jove that may be would I speak
To help my people, wandering blind and weak.

Another letter by the King's side lay,
But closed and sealed; so in the twilight grey
Now did he rise, and summoned presently
A slumbering chamberlain that was thereby,
And bade him toward the treasury lead, and take
Two leathern bags for that same errand's sake;
So forth the twain went to that golden place;
But when they were therein, a mournful face
Still the King seemed to see, e'en as it was
When he from room to room with him did pass
Who now had wronged him; then the gold waxed dim,
For bitter pain his vexed heart wrought for him,
And filled with unused tears his hard wise eyes.
But choking back the thronging memories,
He laid the letter that he erst did hold
Within a casket wrought of steel and gold,
Which straight he locked; then bade his fellow fill
The bags he bore from a great golden hill,
Then to his room, made cold with morn, returned;
And since for change and some swift deed he yearned,
He bade his chamberlain bring hunter's weed,
And saddle him straightway his fleetest steed:
"And see," said he, "before the Prince arise
Ye show this letter to his waking eyes,
And give into his hands these things ye see;
And make good speed, the time grows short for me."
So spake he, and there grew on him a thought
That thither might Bellerophon be brought
Ere he could get him gone; and therewithal
At last the low sun topped the garden wall,
And o'er the dewy turf long shadows threw;
Then, being new clad, the porch he hurried to,
And paced betwixt its pillars feverishly,
Until he heard the horse-boys' cheery cry
And the sharp clatter of the well-shod feet;
Then he ran out, the joyous steed to meet,
And mounted, and rode forth, he scarce knew where,
Until the town was passed, and 'twixt the fair
Green corn-fields of the June-tide he drew rein,
To ponder on his life, so spoiled and vain.

But when Bellerophon awoke that morn,
Weary he felt, as though he long had borne
Some heavy load, and his perplexéd heart
Must chide the life wherein he had a part.
But ere he gat him down to meet the day
With its new troubles, 'thwart his weary way
Was come that chamberlain, who bade him read,
And say what other thing he yet might need.
He read, and knit his anxious brows in thought,
For in his mind great doubt that letter brought
If yet he were in friendship with the King;
And therewith came a dark imagining
Of unseen dangers, and great anger grew
Within his soul, as if the worst were true
Of all he thought might be; and in his mind
It was, that going, he might leave behind
A bitter word to pay for broken troth:
And still the King's man saw that he was wroth,
And watched him curiously, till he had read
The letter thrice, but nought to him he said.
At last he spake, "Sir, even as the King
Now bids me, will I make no tarrying;
And as I came to Argos, even so,
Unfriended, bearing nothing, will I go;
And few farewells are best to-day, I deem,
For like a banished man I would not seem
Among these folk that love me: get we gone,
And tell the King his full will shall be done."

So forth they ride, and ever as the way
Lengthened behind them, and the summer day
Grew hotter on the lovely teeming earth,
The fresh soft air and sounds and sights of mirth
Wrought on Bellerophon, until it seemed
That things might not be e'en as he had deemed
At first. "What thoughts are mine; have I not had
Gifts from his hands—hath he not made me glad
When I was sorry? Therefore will I take
What chance there lies herein for honour's sake.
Nay, more, and may not friendship lie herein?—
May he not drive me forth from shame and sin
And evil fate? Well, howsoe'er it is,
But little evil do I see in this:
Yea, I may see his face again once more,
And crowned with honour come back to this shore,
For now I fear nought—if he thinks to see
Some evil thing that nowise is in me,
Another day the truth of all will show.
Let pass! again from out the place I go
Wherein the sport of fortune I have tried;
If it has failed me, yet the world is wide
And I am young. Now go I forth alone
To do what in my life must needs be done,
And in my own hands lies my fate, I think,

And I shall mix the cup that I must drink:
So be it; thus the world is merrier,
And I shall be a better man than here."

Amid these thoughts, unto the ship he came
And higher yet sprang up the new-stirred flame
Of great desires when first he saw the sea
Leap up against her black sides lovingly,
And heard the sails flap, and the voice of folk,
Who at the sight of him in shouts outbroke,
Since they withal were eager to be gone.
And now were all things done that should be done;
The money rendered up, the King's seal shown,
Unto the master all his will made known,
And on the deck stood the Corinthian.
As up the mast clattering the great rings ran,
And back the hawser to the ship was cast,
The helmsman took the tiller, and at last
The head swung round, trimly the great sail drew,
The broad bows pierced the land of fishes through,
Unheard the red wine fell from out the cup
Into the noisy sea; and then rose up
The cloud of incense-smoke a little way,
But driven from the prow, with the white spray
It mingled, and a little dimmed the crowd
Of white-head waves; then rose the sea-song loud,
While on the stern still stood Bellerophon,
Bidding farewell to what of life was gone,
Pensive, but smiling somewhat to behold
The lengthening wake, and field, and hill, and wold,
And white-walled Argos growing small astern,
That he the pleasure of the gods might learn.

But when the King's man, with a doubtful smile,
Had watched the parting sails a little while,
He turned about, revolving many things
Within his mind, of the weak hearts of kings,
Because the Prince's glory seemed grown dim,
And nowise grand this parting seemed to him;
"For day-long leave-taking there should have been,"
He grumbled, "and fair tables well beseen
Should have been spread the gilded ship anigh,
And many a perfect beast been slain thereby
Unto the gods—Had this Bellerophon
Too great fame for the King of Argos won?
I will be lowly, for no little bliss
I have in Argos, a good place it is—
Or else what thing has happed?"
Howe'er it was,
Slowly again to Argos did he pass,
And here and there he spake upon that day
Of how Bellerophon had gone away,
Perchance as one who would no more return;
And sore hearts were there, who thereat must yearn
To see the face that let a weak hope live;
And folk still doomed with many things to strive,
Who found him helpful—few indeed were there
Who did not pray that well he still might fare
Whereso he was, and few forgot him quite
For many a day and many a changing night.

But Sthenobœa, when she knew that morn
That she was not alone of love forlorn,
But of the thing too that fed love in her,
Yet coldly at the first her lot did bear
In outward seeming: in no other wise
She sat among her maids than when his eyes
Had first met hers. "No babble shall there be
In this fool's land concerning him and me.
Gone is he,—let him die and be forgot:
Cold is my heart that yesterday was hot,
Quenched is the fervent flame of yesterday;
Past is the time when I had cast away,
If he had bidden me, name, and fame, and all:
Now in this dull world e'en let things befall
As they are fated; I am stirred no more
By any hap—hope, hate, and love are o'er."

So spake she in the morn, when, still a Queen,
She sat among her folk as she had been,
Dreaded, unloved; yet as the day wore on
She felt as though it never would be done.
And now she took to wandering restlessly,
And set her face to go unto the sea,
But soon turned back, and through the palace ranged,
And thought she thought not of him, and yet changed
Her face began to grow; and if she spoke,
As one untroubled, aught unto her folk,
Her speech grew wild and broken ere its end;
And as about the place she still did wend,
More than its wonted chill her presence threw
On those who of her coming footsteps knew—
Yea, as she passed by some, she even thought
A look like pity to their eyes was brought,
And then, amidst her craving agony,
Must she grow red with wrath that such could be.

Now came the night, and she must cast aside
All semblance of her coldness and her pride,
And find the weary night was longer yet
Than was the day, and harder to forget
The thoughts that came therewith. How can I tell
In any words the torment of that hell,
That she for her own soul had fashioned so,
That from it never any path did go
To lands of rest; no window was therein,
Through which there shone a hope of happier sin;
But close the fiery walls about her glared,
And on one dreadful picture still she stared,
Intent on that desire, that dreadful love,

The dulness of her savage heart that clove
With wasting fire, a bane to her, and all
Who in the net of her vain life might fall.

The next day wore, and thereto followed night,
And changed through dark and dusk and dawn to light;
And when at last high-risen was the sun,
The women came to do what should be done
In the Queen's chamber: water for the bath
They brought, and dainties such as Venus hath;
Gold combs, embroidered cloths, pearl-threaded strings,
Such unguents as the hidden river brings
Through strange-wrought caverns down into a sea
Where seldom any keel of man may be;
Fine Indian webs, the work of many a year,
And incense that the bleeding tree doth bear
Lone in the desert;—yea, and fear withal
Of what new thing upon that day might fall
From her they served, for on the day now dead
Wild words, strange threatenings had her writhed lips said.
But when within the chamber door they were,
A new hope grew within them, a new fear,
For empty 'neath the golden canopy
The bed lay, and when one maid drew anigh,
She saw that all untouched the linen was
As for that night; so when it came to pass
That in no chamber of that house of gold
Might any one the Lycian's face behold,
Nor any sign of her, then therewithal
To others of the household did they call,
And asked if they had tidings of the Queen;
And when they found that she had not been seen
Since at the end of day to bed she passed,
Within their troubled minds the thing they cast,
And thus remembered that at whiles of late
She had been wont the rising sun to wait
Within the close below her bower; so then
They called together others, maids and men,
And passed with troubled eyes adown the stair;
And coming to the postern-door that there
Led out into the pleasance, that they found
Still open, and thereby upon the ground,
And on a jagged bough of creeping vine,
Gold threads they saw, and silken broidery fine,
That well they knew torn from the Lycian's gown;
Therewith by hasty feet were trodden down
The beds of summer flowers that lay between
The outer wicket of that garden green
And the bower-door—feet that had heeded nought
By what wild ways they to their end were brought;
Then by the gate where the faint sweetbriar-rose
Grew thick about the edges of the close,
Had one pushed through their boughs in such a way
That fragments of a dainty thin array
Yet fluttered on the thorns in the light breeze,
Nor might they doubt who once had carried these.
But when the pleasance-gate they had passed through,
At first within the lingering strip of dew
Beneath the wall, footprints they well could see;
But as the shadow failed them presently,
And little could the close-cropped summer grass
Tell them of feet that might have chanced to pass
Thereby before the dawn, their steps they stayed,
And this and that thing there betwixt them weighed
With many words; then splitting up their band,
Some took the way unto the well-tilled land,
Some seaward went, and some must turn their feet
Unto the wood: yet did not any meet
A further sign; and though some turned again
To tell the tale at once, yet all in vain
Did horsemen scour the country far and wide.
And vainly was the sleuth-hounds' mettle tried—
—Gone was the Lycian, and in such a guise
That silence seemed the best word for the wise.
But many a babbling tongue in Argos was,
Who for no gold had let such matters pass;
And some there were who, mindful of her face
As down the street she passed in queenly grace,
Said that some god had seen her even as they,
And with no will that longer she should stay
Midst dying men, had taken her to his home—
"And we are left behind," they said; but some
Who had been nigher to her, said that she,
Smitten by some benign divinity
Who loved the world and lovely Argos well,
Had fled with changed heart far from man to dwell—
Yea, and might be a goddess even yet.
But other folk, well ready to forget
Her bitter soul, and well content to bear
The changed life that she erst had filled with care,
Smiled, and said yea to better and to worse,
But inly thought that many a heart-felt curse
Her careless ears had heard upon the earth
Had not returned to where it had its birth.

The Gods are kind, and hope to men they give
That they their little span on earth may live,
Nor yet faint utterly; the Gods are kind,
And will not suffer men all things to find
They search for, nor the depth of all to know
They fain would learn: and it was even so
With Sthenobœa; for a fisher old
That day a tale unto his carline told,
E'en such as this:

"When I last night had laid
The boat up 'neath the high cliff, and had made
All things about it trim, and left thee here,

Even as thou knowest, I set out to bear
Those mullets unto Argos. Nought befell
At first whereof is any need to tell,
But when the night had now grown very old,
And, as my wont is, I was waxing bold,
And thinking of the bright returning day,
That drives the sprites of wood and wave away,
As the path leads, I entered the beech-wood
Which, close to where the ancient palace stood,
Clothes the cliff's edge; I entered warily,
Yet thought no evil thing therein to see.
Scarce lighter than dark night it was therein,
Though swift without the day on night did win.
So I went on, I say, and had no fear,
So nigh to day; but getting midmost, where
Thinner it grows, and lighter toward the sea,
I stayed my whistling, for it seemed to me
The wind moaned louder than it should have done,
Because of wind without was well-nigh none.
When I stood still it ended, and again,
E'en as I moved, I seemed to hear it plain.
Trembling, I stopped once more, and heard indeed
A sound as though one moaned in bitter need,
Clearer than was the moaning of the surf,
Now muffled by a rising bank of turf
On the cliff's edge; fear-stricken, yet in doubt,
Through the grey glimmer now I peered about,
And turned unto the sea: then my heart sank,
For by the tree the nighest to that bank
A white thing stood, like, as I now could see,
The daughters of us sons of misery,
Though such I deemed her not—and yet had I
No will or power to turn about and fly;
And now it moaned and moaned, and seemed to writhe
Against the tree its body long and lithe.
Long gazed I, while still colourless and grey,
But swift enow, drew on the dawn of day;
But as I trembled there, at last I heard
How in a low voice it gave forth this word:

"'What say'st thou?—"Live on still—I loved thee not
The while I lived; my bane from thee I got:
And canst thou think that I shall love thee, then,
Where no will is, or power to sons of men?"
I know not, thou mayest hate me, yet I come
That I may look on thee in that new home
My hands built for thee: if the priests speak truth,
What heart thou hast may yet be stirred by ruth,
When thy changed eyes behold the traitorous Queen
Tormented for the vile thing she has been—
If, as the books say, e'en such ways they have
As we on this explored side of the grave.
Yea, thou mayst pity then mine agony,
When no more evil I can do to thee.
Here on the earth I could not weep enow,
Or show thee all my misery here; and thou
Must ever look upon me as a Queen,
Thy mistress and thy fear. Couldst thou have seen
My weary ways upon this long, long night—
Couldst thou behold the coming day's new sight,
When round this tree the folk come gathering
To see the wife and daughter of a King,
Slain by her own hand, and in such a wise—
O thou I hoped for once, might not thine eyes
Have softened had they seen me shivering here,
Alone, unholpen, sick with my first fear,
Beat down by coming shame, and mocked by these
Gay fluttering rags of dainty braveries
That decked my state; by gold, and pearl, and gem,
Over my wretched breast, set in the hem
This night has torn, and o'er my bleeding feet;
Mocked by this glittering girdle, nowise meet
To do the hangman's office?—Couldst thou see
That even so I needs must think of thee—
Whom I have slain, whose eyes I have made blind.
Whose feet I stayed that me they might not find,
That I might not be helped of any one?'

"The day was dawning when her words were done,
And to her waist I saw her set her hand,
And take the girdle thence, and therewith stand
With arms that moved above her head a space
Within the tree; and still she had her face
Turned from me, and I stirred not, minding me
Of tales of treacherous women of the sea,
The bane of men; but now her arms down fell,
And low she spake, yet could I hear her well:

"'Thou bitter noose, that thus shalt end my days,
Rather than blame, shalt thou have thanks and praise
From all men: I have loved one man alone,
And unto him the worst deed have I done
Of all the ill deeds I have done on earth.
—I curse men not, although midst mocks and mirth,
They say, "Rejoice, for Sthenobœa is dead."'

"I started forward as that word she said,
And she beheld me—face to face we met
In the grey light, nor shall I e'er forget
Those dreadful eyes, for such indeed I deem
A goddess high up in the heavens might seem
If she should learn that all was changed, to bring
Death on her head as on an earthly thing.
Alas! I have beheld men die ere now,
But eld or sickness sore their hearts did bow
With feebleness, to bear what might betide,
Or else mid hope of name and fame they died,
And the world left them unawares; but she,
Full of hot blood and life yet, I could see
Was red-lipped as an image, and still had

Such smooth, soft cheeks as made beholders glad
In many a feast and solemn sacrifice;
But yet such dreadful hate was in her eyes,
Such loathing of the ways of Gods and men,
Such gathered-up despair, that truly then
I shook so that my hands might hold no more
The staff and half-filled basket that I bore.

"But in a moment slowly she turned round,
And toward the rising swarded space of ground
Betwixt the beech-trees and the sea she went;
And I, although I knew well her intent,
Yet could not stir. There on the brink she stood;
A cool sea-wind now swept into the wood,
And drave her raiment round her; I could see,
E'en in the dawn, that jewelled broidery
Gleam in the torn folds of the glittering hem;
And now she raised her arms, I saw on them
Jewels again—Then sightless did I stand,
For such a cry I heard, as though a hand
Of fire upon her wasted heart was laid,
And to and fro, I deem, a space she swayed
Her slender body; then I moved at last,
And hurried toward the sheer cliff's edge full fast,
But ere I reached the green brink, was she gone;
And, hanging o'er the rugged edge alone,
With trembling hands, far down did I behold
A white thing meet the dark grey waves and cold;
For overhanging is that foreland high,
And little sand beneath its feet doth lie
At lowest of the tide, and on that morn
Against the scarped rock was the white surf borne.

"Ah, long I looked before I turned away.
No friend, indeed, was lost to me that day—
I knew her not but by the people's voice,
And they 'twas like hereat would e'en rejoice;
Yet o'er my heart a yearning passion swept,
And there where she had stood I lay and wept,
Worn as I am by care and toil and eld.

"But when I rose again, then I beheld
The girdle to the rough bough hanging yet,
And this I loosed and in my hand did get,
And lingered for a while; then went my way,
Nor thought at first if it were night or day,
So much I pondered on the tale so wrought,
What God to nothing such a life had brought.
"But when unto the city gate I came,
I found the thronging people all aflame
With many rumours, and this one they knew
Among all other guesses to be true,
That of the Queen nought knew her wonted place;
But unto me who still beheld that face
There in the beech-wood, idle and base enow
Seemed all that clamour carried to and fro—
Curses and mocks, and foolish laughter loud,
And gaping wonder of the empty crowd;
So in great haste I got my errand done,
And sold my wares e'en unto such an one
As first remembered he must eat to-day,
What king or queen soe'er had passed away.
Thus I returned, bringing the belt with me—
Behold it!—And what way seems best to thee
To take herein?—Poor are we: these bright stones
Would make us happier than the highest ones;
Yet danger hangs thereby, nor have I yet
My living from dead corpses had to get;
Nay, scarcely can I deem this Queen will be
At rest for long beneath the unquiet sea.
—How say'st thou, shall I go unto the King,
And tell him every word about the thing
E'en as I know it?"

"Nay, nay, nay," she said,
"Certes but little do I fear the dead,
Yet think thou not to call the girdle thine;
With a man's death doth every gem here shine—
Our deaths the first: but do thou bide at home,
And let the King hear what may even come
To a King's ears; meddle thou not, nor make
With any such; still shall the brass pot break
The earthen pot—a lord is thanked for what
A poor man often has in prison sat.
But down the beach run thou thy shallop straight,
And from the net take off the heaviest weight,
And do this belt about it; and then go
And in the deepest of the green bay sow
This seed and fruit of love and wrath and crime,
And let this tale be dealt with by great time;
But 'twixt the sea and the green southering hill
We will abide, peaceful, if toilsome still."

So was it done, and e'en as in her heart
Was hidden from all eyes her trait'rous part,
So the sea hid her heart from all but those,
Who, having passed through all eld's dreamy doze,
Died with their tale untold.

Time passed away,
And dimmer grew her name day after day;
And the fair place, where erst her eyes had chilled
Sweet laughter into silence, now was filled
By folk who, midst of fair life slipping by,
No longer had her deeds in memory;
There where she once had dwelt mid hate and praise,
No smile, no shudder now her name could raise.

THE night had fallen or ere the tale was done,
And on the hall-floor now the pale moon shone
In fitful gleams, for the snow fell no more,
But ragged clouds still streamed the pale sky o'er;
A while they sat, and seemed to hear the sea

Beat 'gainst the ice-glazed cliffs unceasingly,
Though nought belike that noise was but the wind
Caught in some corner, half blocked-up and blind
With the white drift :—just so the mournfulness
Of the tale told out did their hearts oppress
With seeming sorrow, for a glorious life
Twisted awry and crushed dead in the strife
Long ages past ; while yet more like it was
That with the old tale o'er their souls did pass
Shades of their own dead hopes, and buried pain
By measured words drawn from its grave again,
Though no more deemed a strange unheard-of thing
Made but for them ; as when their hearts did cling
To those dead hopes of things impossible,
While their tale's ending yet was left to tell.

STILL the hard frost griped all things bitterly,
And who of folk might now say when or why
The earth should change and spring come back again.
—Spring clean forgotten, as amidst his pain
Some hapless lover's chance unmeaning kiss
Given unto lips that never shall be his
In time long past, ere bitter knowledge came,
And cherished love was grown a wrong and shame.
—Yet mid the dead swoon of the earth, the days
'Gan lengthen now, and on the hard-beat ways
No more the snow drave down ; and, spite of all,
The goodman's thoughts must needs begin to fall
Upon the seed hid in the dying year,
And he must busy him about his gear ;
And in the city, at the high noon, when
The faint sun glimmered, sat the ancient men,
With young folk gathered round about once more,
Who heeded not the east wind's smothered roar,
Since unto most of them for mere delight
Were most things made, the dull days and the bright ;
And change was life to them, and death a tale
Little believed, that chiefly did avail
To quicken love and make a story sweet.

Now the old Swabian's glittering eyes did meet
A maiden's glance, who reddened at his gaze,
Whereon a pleasant smile came o'er his face,
As from his pouch a yellow book he drew
And spake :
"Of many things the wise man knew,
The man who wrote this ; many words he made
Of haps that still perchance for great are weighed
There in the East : how kings were born and died,
And how men lied to them, and how they lied,
And how they joyed in doing good and ill :
Now mid the great things that his book do fill,
Here is a tale, told, saith he, by a crone
At some grand feast forgotten long agone,
Which may perchance scarce be of much less worth
Than tales of deeds that reddened the green earth—
Fools' deeds of men, who well may be to you
As good as nameless, since ye never knew
The ways of those midst whom they lived erewhile,
And what their hearts deemed good, or nought, and vile."

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS.

ARGUMENT.

There was a man in a certain great city who on his wedding-day unwittingly gave his spousal-ring to the goddess Venus, and for this cause trouble came upon him, till in the end he got his ring back again.

THE story of this chronicle
Doth of an ancient city tell,
Well built upon a goodly shore;
The wide lands stretched behind it bore
Great wealth of oil and wine and wheat;
The great sea carried to its feet
The dainty things of many lands;
There the hid miners' toiling hands
Dragged up to light the dull blue lead,
And silver white, and copper red,
And dreadful iron; many a time
The sieves swung to the woman's rhyme
O'er gravelly streams that carried down
The golden sand from caves unknown;
Dark basalt o'er the sea's beat stood,
And porphyry cliffs as red as blood;
From the white marble quarries' edge
Down to the sweeping river's sedge,
Sheep bore the web that was to be;
The purple lay beneath the sea,
The madder waved in the light wind,
The woad-stalks did the peasant bind
That were to better his worn hood;
And ever, amid all things good,
Least of all things this lucky land
Lacked for the craftsman's cunning hand.

So richer grew that city still
Through many a year of good and ill,
And when the white beasts drew the car
That bore their banner to the war,
From out the brazen gates enwrought
With many a dreamer's steadfast thought,
An hundred thousand men poured out
To shake the scared earth with their shout.

Now little will your wonder be
That mid so great prosperity
Enough there was of ill and sin;
That many folk who dwelt therein
Lived evil lives from day to day,
Nor put their worst desires away.
But as in otherwise indeed
Of God's good pardon had they need,
And were herein as other folk,
So must they bear this added yoke,
That rife was wicked sorcery there;
And why I know not; if it were
Wrought by a lingering memory
Of how that land was wont to be
A dwelling-place, a great stronghold
Unto the cozening gods of old.
It might be so; but add thereto
That of all men life's sweets they knew,
That death to them was wholly bad,
So that perchance a hope they had
That yet another power there was
Than His who brought that death to pass.

Howe'er that may be, this I know,
That in that land men's lives were so
That they in trouble still must turn
Unholy things and strange to learn:
Had this man mid the infidel
A lost son, folk might buy and sell;
Did that one fear to pass his life
With unrewarded love at strife;
Or had he a long-missing keel;
Or was he with the commonweal
In deadly strife; or perchance laid
Abed, by fever long downweighed;
Or were his riches well-nigh done;—
Love, strife, or sickness, all was one,
This seemed the last resource to them,
To catch out at the strange-wrought hem
Of the dark gown that hid away
The highest ill from light of day.
Yea, though the word unspoken was,
And though each day the holy mass
At many an altar gold-arrayed
From out the painted book was said,
And though they doubted nought at all

Of how the day of days must fall
At last upon the earth, and range
All things aright that once seemed strange;
Yet Evil seemed so great a thing
That 'neath its dusk o'ershadowing wing
They needs must cower down; now at least
While half a god and half a beast
Man seemed; some parley must they hold
With God's foe, nor be overbold
Before the threatening of a hand
Whose might they did not understand,
Though oftentimes they felt it sore:
And through this faithlessness, the more
Ill things had power there, as I deem,
Till some men's lives were like a dream,
Where nought in order can be set,
And nought worth thence the soul may get,
Or weigh one thing for what it is;
Yea, at the best mid woe and bliss,
Some dreamlike day would come to most.

Now this great city still made boast
That, mid her merchants, men there were
Who e'en from kings the bell might bear
For wealth and honour: and I think
That no men richer wines might drink,
Were better housed, or braver clad,
Or more of all the world's joy had
Than their rich men; that no king's door
Could show forth greater crowds of poor,
Who lacked for bread and all things good,
Than in that land a merchant's could—
Yea, rich indeed 'mongst all were they.

Now on a certain summer day
One of their fairest palaces,
A paradise midst whispering trees,
Beyond its wont was bright and fair;
Great feast did men get ready there,
Because its young lord, lately come
Back from the eastlands to his home,
That day should wed a lovely maid;
He, for that tide too long delayed,
A lading of great rarities
Had brought to dazzle those sweet eyes;
So had you wandered through the house
From hall to chamber amorous,
While in the minster church hard by,
Mid incense smoke and psalmody,
The gold-clad priest made one of twain;
—So wandering had you tried in vain
To light on an uncomely thing;
Such dyes as stain the parrot's wing,
The May-flowers of the evening sky,
Made bright the silken tapestry;
And threaded pearls therein were wrought,
And emeralds from far eastlands brought
To deck the shapes of knight and king;—
His maybe who of old did sing
God's praises 'twixt the shield and spear,
Or his the Trojan folk did fear.
Or from the silken mimicry
Of fair Cassandra might you see
Óileus the red ruby tear,
As he her snowy breast made bare;
Since woe itself must there be sweet
For such a place to be made meet.

If such things hid the marble walls,
What wonder that the swift footfalls
Were dulled upon the marble floor
By silken webs from some far shore,
Whereon were pictured images
Of other beasts and other trees
And other birds than these men knew;
That from the vaulted ceilings' blue
Stars shone like Danaë's coming shower,
Or that some deftly painted bower
Thence mocked the roses of that day?
Full many a life had passed away,
And many a once young hand grown old,
Dealing with silk and gems and gold,
Through weary days and anxious nights,
That went to fashion those delights,
Which added now small bliss indeed
To those who pleasure had to meed
Upon a day when all were glad:
Yet when the Church all dues had had,
And the street, filled with minstrelsy,
Gave token of the twain anigh;
When through the hall-doors, open wide,
Streamed in the damsels of the bride;
When the tall brown-cheeked bridegroom came
Flushed with hot love and pride and shame,
And by the hand his love led on,
Who midst that glorious company shone
Like some piece of the pale moonlight
Cut off from quietness and night,—
Then all these dainty things in sooth
Seemed meet for such an hour of youth;
And vain were words such joy to stay;
And deathless seemed that little day,
And as a fitful hapless dream
The past and future well might seem.

What need to tell how sea and earth
Had been run through to make more mirth,
For folk already overglad—
What cunning pageants there they had;
What old tales acted o'er again,
Where grief and death glad folk did feign,
Who deemed their own joy still would bide;
What old songs sung wherein did hide
Meet meanings for that lovesome day;

What singing of the bridal lay
By a fair, soft-voiced trembling maid,
Like to the Goddess well arrayed,
Who, dreaded once, was grown to be
A pageant-maker's imagery?
Why make long words of that sweet band
Who scattered flowers from slender hand,
And brought the garlands forth? How tell
What music on the feasters fell,
So sweet and solemn, that from mirth
O'erstrained well-nigh must tears have birth?—
Nay, let all pass, and deem indeed
That every joyance was their meed
Wherewith men cheat themselves to think
That they of endless joy may drink;
That every sense in turn must bear
Of o'er-sweet pleasure its full share,
Till for awhile the very best
They next might gain seemed utter rest,
And of some freshness were they fain.
So then the garden did they gain,
And wandered there by twos and threes
Amidst the flowers, or 'neath the trees,
Sat, keeping troublous thoughts at bay.

So fared they through the earlier day;
But when the sun did now decline,
And men grew graver for the wine
That erst such noble tales had told;
And maids no more were free and bold
But reddened at the words half-said,
While round about the rebecks played;
Then needs must the feastmasters strive
Too pensive thoughts away to drive,
And make the sun go down with mirth
At least upon that spot of earth;
So did the minstrel men come in,
And tale-tellers the lay begin,
And men by fabled woes were stirred,
Or smiling their own follies heard
Told of some other; and withal
Here did the dice on table fall,
Here stout in arms the chess-king stood;
There young men stirred their sluggish blood
With clattering sword and buckler play,
There others on the daisies lay
Above the moat, and watched their quill
Make circles in the water still,
Or laughed to see the damsel hold
Her dainty skirt enwrought with gold
Back from the flapping tench's tail,
Or to his close-set dusky mail
With gentle force brought laughingly
The shrinking finger-tip anigh.

Midst these abode a little knot
Of youths and maidens, on a spot
Fenced by a cloister of delight,
Well wrought of marble green and white;
Wherein upon a wall of gold
Of Tristram was the story told,
Well done by cunning hands that knew
What form to man and beast was due;
Midmost, upon a space of green,
Half shaded from the summer sheen,
Half with the afternoon sun thrown
Upon its daisies glittering strewn,
Was gathered that fair company
Wherewith the bridegroom chanced to be,
Who through the cloister door must gaze
From time to time 'thwart the sun's blaze
On to a shaded space of grass
Whereon his new-wed maiden was,
Hearkening in seeming to a song
That told of some past love and wrong,
But as he strained his ear to catch
Across the wind some louder snatch
Of the sweet tune, new-coming folk
The sweet sight hid, the music broke;
Of these one maiden trimly girt
Bore in her gleaming upheld skirt
Fair silken balls sewed round with gold;
Which when the others did behold
Men cast their mantles unto earth,
And maids within their raiments' girth
Drew up their gown-skirts, loosening here
Some button on their bosoms clear
Or slender wrists, there making tight
The laces round their ankles light;
For folk were wont within that land
To cast the ball from hand to hand,
Dancing meanwhile full orderly;
So now the bridegroom with a sigh,
Struggling with love's quick-gathering yoke,
Turned round unto that joyous folk,
And gat him ready for the play.

Lovely to look on was the sway
Of the slim maidens 'neath the ball
As they swung back to note its fall
With dainty balanced feet; and fair
The bright outflowing golden hair,
As swiftly, yet in measured wise
One maid ran forth to gain the prize;
Eyes glittered and young cheeks glowed bright,
And gold-shod foot, round limb and light,
Gleamed from beneath the girded gown
That, unrebuked, untouched, was thrown
Hither and thither by the breeze;
Shrill laughter smote the thick-leaved trees,
Familiar names clear voices cried,
Sweet sound rose up as sweet sound died,
And still the circle spread and spread,
As folk to all that goodlihead

Kept thronging in, till they must stay
A little while the eager play,
And now, for very breathlessness,
With rest the trodden daisies bless.
So now against the wall some leaned,
Some from amidst the daisies gleaned
The yellow trefoil, and the blue
Faint speedwell in the shade that grew;
Some panting sat and clasped their knees
With faces turned unto the breeze,
And midst them the new-comers stood,
With hair smooth yet and unstirred blood.

Laurence, the bridegroom, as the game
Unto this tide of resting came,
Turned idle eyes about, and met
An image in the grey wall set,
A thing he knew from early days:
There in a gilded carven place
Queen Venus' semblance stood, more fair
Than women whom that day did bear,
And yet a marvel for the life
Wherewith its brazen limbs were rife.
Not in that country was she wrought,
Or in those days; she had been brought
From a fair city far away,
Ruined e'en then for many a day;
Full many a tale had there been told
Of him who once that Queen did mould,
And all of these were strange to hear,
And dreadful some, and full of fear.
And now as Laurence gazed upon
That beauty, in the old days won
He knew not from what pain and toil,
Vague fear new-risen seemed to spoil
The summer joy; her loveliness
That hearts, long dead now, once did bless
Grown dangerous, 'gan to lead his mind
On through a troublous maze and blind
Of unnamed thoughts, and silently,
With knitted brow, he drew anigh,
And midst the babbling close did gaze
Into the marvel of her face:
Till, with a sudden start, at last
His straying thoughts he seemed to cast
Aside, and laughed aloud, and said:

"O cold and brazen goodlihead,
How lookest thou on those that live?
Thou who, tales say, wert wont to strive
On earth, in heaven, and 'neath the earth,
To wrap all in thy net of mirth,
And drag them down to misery
Past telling—and didst thou know why?—
And what has God done with thee then,
That thou art perished from midst men
E'en as the things thou didst destroy,
Thy Paris and thy town of Troy,
And many a man and maid and town?
How is thy glory fallen adown,
That I, even I, must sigh for thee!"

So spake he, as the minstrelsy
Struck up once more a joyous strain,
And called them to the play again;
And therewithal he looked about,
In answer to the merry shout
That called on him by name to turn.
But even therewith the sun did burn
Upon his new-gained spousal-ring—
A wondrous work, a priceless thing,
Whereon, 'neath mulberries white and red,
And green leaves, lay fair Thisbe dead
By her dead love; the low sun's blaze
It caught now, and he fell to gaze
Thereon, and said at last:

"Perchance
The ball might break it in the dance,
And that an ugly omen were;
Nay, one to ward it well is here.
Thou, Goddess, that heardst Thisbe's vow,
From blind eyes gaze upon her now
Till I return mine own to claim;
And as thou mayst, bear thou the shame
Of being the handmaid to my love;
Full sure I am thou wilt not move."

Know that this image there did stand
With arm put forth and open hand,
As erst on Ida triumphing;
And now did Laurence set the ring
On the fourth finger fair and straight,
And laughing, "Thou mayst bear the weight,"
Turned back again unto the play.

To him slow passed the time away;
But when at last in purple shade
'Twixt wall and wall the grass was laid,
And he grew gladder therewithal,
Then weariness on folk 'gan fall;
The fifes left off their dancing tune,
And sang of lovers fain of June,
And thence that company 'gan go
By twos and threes with footsteps slow,
Pensive at end of mirthful day;
But from them Laurence turned away
Unto the carven dame, to take
The ring he wore for true-love's sake;—
Daylight it was, though broad and red
The sun was grown, and shadows led
Eastward with long lines o'er the grass—
—Daylight, but what had come to pass?

Nearby those voices still he heard
In laugh and talk and careless word;

Upon his cheek the wind blew cold;
His own fair house he did behold
Changed nowise; from the little close
The scent of trodden grass arose—
How could it be a dream?—Yet there
She stood, the moveless image fair,
The little-noticed, oft-seen thing,
With hand fast closed upon his ring.

At first, in agony and haste,
A frantic minute did he waste
In pulling at the brazen hand,
That was as firm as rocks that stand
The day-long beating of the sea;
Then did he reel back dizzily,
And gaze at sky and earth and trees
Once more, as asking words from these
To ravel out his tale for him.
But now as they were waxing dim
Before his eyes, he heard his name
Called out, and therewith fear of shame
Brought back his heart and made him man.
Unto his fellows, pale and wan,
He turned, who, when they saw him so,
What thing might ail him fain would know,
For wild and strange he looked indeed;
Then stammered he, "Nay, nought I need
But wine, in sooth: John, mind'st thou not
How on the steaming shore and hot
Of Serendib a sting I gat
From some unseen worm, as we sat
Feasting one eve? Well, the black folk
E'en saved my life from that ill stroke,
By leech-craft; yet they told me then
I oft should feel that wound again,
Till I had fifty years or more:
This is a memory of that shore;
A thing to be right soon forgot."
And to himself, "If this is not
An empty dream, a cutting file
My ring therefrom shall soon beguile,
When, at the ending of the day,
These wearying guests have gone away."

Now unto supper all folk turned,
And 'neath the torches red gold burned,
And the best pageants of the day
Swept through the hall and said their say,
Departing e'en as men's lives go:
But though to Laurence slow and slow
Those hours must needs seem, none the less
He gave himself to mirthfulness,
At least in seeming; till at last
All guests from out the palace passed.
And now the short soft summer night
Was left at peace for their delight;
But Laurence, muffled up and hid,
Shrinking, betwixt his servants slid
For now he had a little space
To come unto that mystic place,
Where still his ring he thought to see.
A file and chisel now had he,
And weighty hammer; yet withal
As he drew toward the cloister-wall,
Well-nigh he called himself a fool,
To go with cloak and blacksmith's tool,
And lay hard blows upon a dream;
For now in sooth he nigh must deem
His eyes had mocked him; reaching soon
That cloister by the broad high moon
He hurried through the door, and heard
All round the sound of June's brown bird
Above the voices of the night;
Trembling, he sprang into the light
Through the black arches of the place,
And stealing on stood face to face
With the old smiling image there,
And lowered to her fingers fair
His troubled, wild, and shrinking eyes,
And stretched his hand out to the prize:—
His eyes, his hand, were there in vain.

Once more, as sure of coming gain,
As erst in Ida she did stand,
So stood she now; her open hand,
That late he saw closed round the ring,
Empty and bare of anything:
Gaping awhile he stood, for fear
Now made him think a voice to hear,
And see her change soon, and depart
From out their midst; but gathering heart,
He muttered, "Yet, what have I seen?
Should it not even thus have been,
If the closed hand were but a dream?
Of some guest worser must I deem;
Go, fool; thine own love waiteth thee."
Therewith he went, yet fearfully
Looked o'er his shoulder on the way,
And terror on his heart still lay.

Yet to his chamber at the last
He came, and to the floor he cast
His wrapping mantle, and alone
He strove to think of all things done,
And strove once more to bring again
The longing sweet, the joy and pain
That on that morn he called desire;
For wretched fear had dulled that fire:
And, whereas erewhile he had deemed
That life was joy, and it had seemed
A never-ending game to be,
A fair and rich eternity
Before him, now was it indeed
A troublous fight, where he should need

Help on the left hand and the right,
Nor yet so 'scape the certain night.

But mid these thoughts he heard withal
The chamberlain to pages call,
To bear the bridal wine to him;
And as he might he strove to dim
His anxious thought, and with a smile
The coming curious eyes beguile.
They entered now, and whiles that he
Drank from the gold cup feverishly,
The minstrels, ere his draught was done,
Struck up *The King of England's Son*,
And soon amid that ordered word
The lessening sound of feet he heard,
And then the song itself must die.
But from the bridechamber nearby
Now for a space rose clear and sweet
The damsels' song, *Fair Marguerite;*
And when that ended all was still;
And he with strained, divided will,
Trembling with love, yet pale with fear,
To the bridechamber door drew near,
Muttering some well-remembered charm
That erst had kept his soul from harm.
Yet misty seemed the place; the wall—
Its woven waters seemed to fall,
Its trees, its beasts, its loom-wrought folk,
Now seemed indeed as though they woke,
And moved unto him as he went.
The room seemed full of some strange scent;
And strains of wicked songs he heard,
And half-said God-denying word:
He reeled, and cried aloud, and strove
To gain the door that hid his love;
It seemed to him that, were he there,
All would again be calm and fair.
But in the way before his eyes
A cloudy column seemed to rise,
Cold, odorous, impalpable,
And a voice cried, "*I love thee well,*
And thou hast loved me ere to-night,
And longed for this o'ergreat delight,
And had no words therefor to pray.
Come, have thy will, and cast away
Thy foolish fear, thy foolish love,
Since me at least thou canst not move,
Now thou with ring hast wedded me:
Come, cast the hope away from thee
Wherewith unhappy brooding men
Must mock their threescore years and ten;
Come, thou that mockest me! I live;
How with my beauty canst thou strive?
Unhappy if thou couldst! for see
What depth of joy there is in me!"

Then round about him closed the mist;
It was as though his lips were kissed
His body by soft arms embraced,
His fingers lovingly enlaced
By other fingers; until he
Midst darkness his own ring did see.

Nought else awhile; then back there came
New vision: as amidst white flame,
The flower-girt goddess wavered there,
Nor knew he now where they twain were
Midst wild desire that nigh did rend
His changed heart; then there came an end
Of all that light and ecstasy;
His soul grew blind, his eyes could see;
And, moaning from an empty heart,
He saw the hangings blown apart
By the night wind, the lights flare red
In the white light the high moon shed
O'er all the place he knew so well,
And senseless on the floor he fell.

Ah, what a night to what a morn!
Ah, what a morrow black with scorn,
And hapless end of happy love!
What shame his helpless shame to prove!
For who, indeed, alone could bear
The dreadful shame, the shameful fear,
Of such a bridal? Think withal,
More trusted such a tale would fall
Upon those folks' ears than on most,
Who, as I said erst, saw a host
Of wild things lurking in the night;
To whom was magic much as right
As prayers or holy psalmody.

So nothing else it seemed might be,
When Laurence for three nights had striven
To gain the fair maid to him given,
But that her sire should know the thing
And help him with his counselling.
So, weary, wasted with his shame,
Unto his house the bridegroom came,
And when the twain were left alone
He told him how the thing had gone.
The old man doubted not the sooth
Of what he said, but, touched with ruth,
Yet spent no time in mourning vain.

"Son," said he, "idle were the pain
To seek if thou some deed hast wrought
Which on thine head this grief hath brought—
Some curse for which this doth atone,
Some laugh whereby is honour gone
From the dread powers unnameable;
Rather, who now can help thee well?"

"Small heed, my father," Laurence said,
"Gave I to such things, and small dread
To anything I could not see,
But it were God who fashioned me:
From witch-wives have I bought ere now
Wind-bags indeed, but yet did trow
Nothing therein, but dealt with these
My shipmen's clamour to appease."

"Well," said he, "that perchance is worse
For thee, yea, may have gained this curse.
But come, I know a certain man
Who in these things great marvels can,
And something of an age are we,
Yoke-fellows in astronomy—
A many years agone, alas!"

So therewithal the twain did pass
Toward the great church, and entered there,
And, going 'twixt the pillars fair,
Came to a chapel, where a priest
Made ready now the Holy Feast:
"Hist," said the old man, "there he is;
May he find healing for all this!
Kneel down, and note him not too much
No easy man he is to touch."

So down upon the floor of stone
They knelt, until the mass was done,
Midst peasant folk, and sailors' wives,
Sore careful for their husbands' lives;
But when the mass was fully o'er
They made good haste unto the door
That led unto the sacristy:
And there a ring right fair to see
The old man to a verger gave
In token, praying much to have
With Dan Palumbus speech awhile:
The verger took it with a smile,
As one who says, "Ye ask in vain;"
But presently he came again,
And said, "Fair sir, come hither then,
The priest will see you of all men!"

With eyes made grave by their intent
From out the lordly church they went
Into the precinct, and withal
They passed along the minster wall,
And heard amidst the buttresses
The grey hawks chatter to the breeze,
The sanctus bell run down the wind;
Until the priest's house did they find,
Built 'neath the belfry huge and high,
Fluttered about perpetually
By chattering daws, and shaken well
From roof to pavement, when the bell
Flung out its sound o'er night or day.

"Sirs, Dan Palumbus takes his way
E'en now from out the sacristy,"
The verger said; "sirs, well be ye!
For time it is that I were gone."
Therewith he left the twain alone
Beside the door, and, sooth to say,
In haste he seemed to get away
As one afeard; but they bode there,
And round about the house did peer,
But found nought dreadful: small it was
Set on a tiny plot of grass,
And on each side the door a bay
Brushed 'gainst the oak porch rent and grey;
A yard-wide garden ran along
The wall, by ancient box fenced strong;
And in the corner, where it met
The belfry, was a great yew set,
Where sat the blackbird-hen in spring,
Hearkening her bright-billed husband sing
A peaceful place it should have been
For one who of the world had seen
O'er much, and quiet watch would keep
Over his soul awaiting sleep.

But now they heard the priest draw nigh,
And saw him and his shadow high
Wind round the wind-worn buttresses?
So coming by the last of these
He met them face to face: right tall
He was; his straight black hair did fall
About his shoulders; strong he seemed,
His eyes looked far off, as he dreamed
Of other things than what they saw;
Strange lines his thin pale face did draw
Into a set wild look of pain
And terror. As he met the twain
He greeted well his ancient friend,
And prayed them within doors to wend.
Small was his chamber; books were there
Right many, and in seeming fair.
But who knows what therein might be
'Twixt board and board of beechen tree?

Palumbus bade them sit, and sat,
And talked apace of this and that,
Nor heeded that the youth spake wild,
Nor that his old friend coughed and smiled,
As ill at ease, while the priest spake,
Then from his cloak a purse did take,
And at the last pushed in his word
Edgewise, as 'twere. Palumbus heard
As one who fain had been born deaf,
Then rose and cried, "Thou fill'st the sheaf,
Thou fill'st the sheaf! this is my doom,
Well may the sexton make my tomb!"
And up and down he walked, muttering,
'Twixt closed teeth, many a nameless thing.

At last he stopped and said, "O ye,
I knew that ye would come to me,
And offer me great store of gold:
Full often good help have I sold,
And thus this tide should I have done;
But on this mountain of grey stone
I stood last night, and in my art
I dealt; and terror filled my heart,
And hope, and great uncertainty;
Therefore I deem that I shall die;
For cool and bold erst have I been
Whatever I have heard and seen;
But the old Master of my fear
Seems afar now, and God grown near;
And soon I look to see his face.
Therefore, if but a little space,
Would I be on his side, and do
A good deed; all the more for you;
Since ye are part of sweet days, friend,
That once we deemed would never end;
And in thine eyes meseems, O youth,
Kindness I see and hope and truth;
And thou and he may speak a word
For me unto my master's Lord:—
Well, I must reap that I did sow—
But take your gold again and go:
And thou for six days fast and pray,
And come here on the seventh day
About nightfall; then shalt thou learn
In what way doth the matter turn,
And fully know of time and place,
And be well armed thy foe to face."

So homeward doubtful went the twain,
And Laurence spent in fear and pain
The six long days; and so at last,
When the seventh sun was well-nigh past,
Came to that dark man's fair abode;
The grey tower with the sunset glowed,
The daws wheeled black against the sky
About the belfry windows high,
Or here and there one sank adown
The dizzy shaft of panelled stone;
And sound of children nigh the close
Was mingled with the cries of those;
And e'en as Laurence laid his hand
Upon the latch, and there did stand
Lingering a space, most startling clear
The sweet chime filled the evening air.
He entered mid the great bell's drone,
And found Palumbus all alone
Mid books laid open:
"Rest," said he;
"Time presses not for thee or me:
Surely shall I die soon enow."
Silent, with hands laid to his brow,
He sat then, nor did Laurence speak,
Fearing perchance some spell to break;
At last the priest caught up a book,
And from its leaves a letter took,
And unknown words there were on it
For superscription duly writ,
And sealed it was in solemn wise.
He said:
"Thou knowest where there lies
Five leagues hence, or a little less,
North of the town, a sandy ness
That shipmen call St. Clement's Head;
South of it dreary land and dead
Lies stretched now, and the sea bears o'er
Ruin of shingle evermore,
And saps the headland year by year,
And long have husbandmen had fear
Of its short-lived and treacherous soil,
And left it free from any toil.
There, with thy face turned toward the land,
At the hill's foot take thou thy stand,
Just where the turf the shingle meets,
Wherewith the sea the marshland eats;
But seaward if thy face thou turn,
What I have learned then shalt thou learn
With like reward—watch carefully
And well, and a strange company
Shall pass thee as thou standest there,
And heed thee not—some foul some fair,
Some glad some sorry; rule thy heart,
And heed them nothing for thy part,
Till at the end of all thou seest
A great lord on a marvellous beast
Unnameable; on him cry out,
And he thereon shall turn about
And ask thy need; have thou no fear,
But give him what I give thee here,
And let him read, and thou shalt win
Thine happiness, and have no sin.
But as for me, be witness thou
That in the scroll I give thee now,
My death lies, and I know it well,
And cry to God against his hell."

In languid voice he spake as one,
Who knows the task that must be done,
And how each word from him should fall,
And gives no heed to it at all;
But here he stopped a little space,
And once more covered up his face;
But soon began his speech again
In a soft voice, and freed from pain:

"And for the folk that thou shalt see,
Whence cometh all that company,—
Marvel thou not thereat, for know
That this is sure; long years ago,
Leagues seaward of that barren place,

The temple of a glorious race,
Built with far mightier walls than these,
Stood fair midst groves of whispering trees.
Thence come these folk, remembering
Their glory, once so great a thing—
I have said: Could they be once more
As they have been,—but all is o er,
What matters what is, what has been,
And what shall be, when I have seen
The last few hours of my last day?—
Depart.—Ah me, to cast away
Such power as I on earth have had!
I who could make the lover glad
Above his love's dead face,—at least
A little while—now has all ceased
With that small scrap of black and white:
Think of me, God, midst thy delight,
And save me! yea, or do thy will!
For thou too hast beheld my skill."

The scroll did Laurence hold in hand,
And silent he a space did stand,
Gazing upon Palumbus, who
Sat open-eyed, as though he knew
Nought of what things were round about;
So, stealthily, and in great doubt
Of strange things yet to come to pass,
Did Laurence gain the darkening grass,
And through the precinct and the town
He passed, and reached the foreshores brown,
And gathered heart, and as he might
Went boldly forward through the night.
At first on his left hand uprose
Great cliffs and sheer, and, rent from those,
Boulders strewn thick across the strand,
Made weary work for foot and hand;
But well he knew the path indeed,
And scarce of such light had he need
As still the summer eve might shed
From the high stars or sunset dead.
Soft was the lovely time and fair;
A little sea-wind raised his hair,
That seemed as though from heaven it blew.
All sordid thoughts the sweet time slew,
And gave good hope such welcoming,
That presently he 'gan to sing;
Though still amid the quiet night
He could not hear his song aright
For the grave thunder of the sea
That smote the beach so musically,
And in the dim light seemed so soft
As each great wave was raised aloft
To fall in foam, you might have deemed
That waste of ocean was but dreamed,
And that the surf's strong music was
By some unknown thing brought to pass;
And Laurence, singing as he went,
As in some lower firmament,
Beneath the line that marked where met
The world's roof and the highway wet,
Could see a ship's light gleam afar
Scarce otherwise than as a star,
While o'erhead fields of thin white cloud
The more part of the stars did shroud.

So on he went, and here and there
A few rough fisher-carles there were,
Launching their ordered keels to sea
Eager to gain, if it might be,
The harbour-mouth with morning-light
Or else some bird that flies by night
Wheeled round about with his harsh cry;
Or as the cliffs sank he could spy
Afar some homestead glittering
With high feast or some other thing.
Such gleams of fellowship had he
At first along the unquiet sea,
But when a long way off the town
The cliffs were wholly sunken down,
And on the marshland's edge he went,
For all sounds then the night-jar sent
Its melancholy laugh across
The sea-wind moaning for the loss
Of long-drowned lands, that in old time
Were known for great in many a clime.

But the moon rose, and 'neath its light,
Cloud-barred, the wide wastes came in sight,
With gleaming, sand-choked, reed-clad pools,
And marsh lights for the mock of fools;
And o'er the waste beneath the moon
The sea-wind piped a dreary tune,
And louder grew, and the world then
No more seemed made for sons of men,
And summer seemed an empty name,
And harvest-time a mock and shame:
Such hopeless ruin seemed settled there,
On acres sunny once and fair.

But Laurence now could well behold
The sandy headland bare and bold
Against the sea, and stayed his feet
Awhile, to think how he should meet
These nameless things, his enemies,
The lords of terror and disease;
Then trembling, hastened on, for thought
Full many an image to him brought,
Once seen, with loathing cast aside,
But ready e'en for such a tide,
Come back with longing's added sting,
And whatso horrors time could bring.
Now thrusting all these thoughts apart
He hastened on with hardy heart,
Till on the doubtful place he stood

Where the sea sucked the pasture's blood.
And with back turned unto the sea
He strove to think right strenuously
Of this and that well-liking place;
The merry clamour of the chase,
Pageant of soldier or of priest,
Or market-place or crowded feast,
Or splintered spears for ladies' sake,
Until he 'gan to dream awake:
Then, midst of all his striving, still
His happiest thoughts must turn to ill,
As in a fevered, restless dream.
He thought about some flowery stream,
Himself in gilded boat thereon—
A livid cloud came o'er the sun,
A great wave swept from bank to bank.
Or flower-crowned amid friends he drank,
And as he raised the red wine up
Fell poison shrieked from out the cup.
The garland when his heart was full
He set upon a fleshless skull;
The lute turned to a funeral bell,
The golden door led down to hell.
Then back from dreams his soul he brought,
And of his own ill matters thought,
And found his fear the lesser grew
When all his heart therein he threw.

Yet awful was the time indeed,
And of good heart sore had he need:
The wind's moan louder than before,
Some wave cast higher up the shore,
The night-bird's brushing past his head,—
All little things grew full of dread;
Yet did he waver nought at all,
Or turn, for whatso thing might fall.

The moon was growing higher now,
The east wind had been strong to blow
The night sky clear from vexing cloud,
And in the west his flock did crowd;
Sharper things grew beneath the light,
As with a false dawn; thin and bright
The hornéd poppies' blossoms shone
Upon a shingle-bank, thrust on
By the high tide to choke the grass;
And nigh it the sea-holly was,
Whose cold grey leaves and stiff stark shade
On earth a double moonlight made:
Above him, specked with thorn and whin,
And clad with short grey grass and thin,
The hill ran up, and Laurence knew
That down the other slope there grew
A dark pine-wood, whose added sound
Scarce noted, yet did more confound,
With changing note, his wearied mind.

But now with drowsiness grown blind,
Once more he tottered on his place,
And let fall down his weary face;
But then remembering all his part,
Once and again woke with a start,
And dozed again; and then at last,
Shuddering, all slumber from him cast,
Yet scarce knew if he lived or no:
For by his scared wild eyes did go
A wondrous pageant, noiselessly,
Although so close it passed him by;
The fluttering raiment by him brushed,
As through its folds the sea-wind rushed.

By then his eyes were opened wide.
Already up the grey hill-side
The backs of two were turned to him:
One like a young man tall and slim,
Whose heels with rosy wings were dight;
One like a woman clad in white,
With glittering wings of many a hue,
Still changing, and whose shape none knew.
In aftertime would Laurence say,
That though the moonshine, cold and grey,
Flooded the lonely earth that night,
These creatures in the moon's despite
Were coloured clear, as though the sun
Shone through the earth to light each one,
And terrible was that to see.

But while he stood, and shudderingly
Still gazed on those departing twain,
Yet 'gan to gather heart again,
A noise like echoes of a shout
Seemed in the cold air all about,
And therewithal came faint and thin
What seemed a far-off battle's din,
And on a sight most terrible
His eyes in that same minute fell—
The images of slaughtered men,
With set eyes and wide wounds, as when
Upon the field they first lay slain;
And those who there had been their bane
With open mouths as if to shout,
And frightful eyes of rage and doubt,
And hate that never more should die.
Then went the shivering fleers by,
With death's fear ever in their eyes;
And then the heaped-up fatal prize,
The blood-stained coin, the unset gem,
The gold robe torn from hem to hem,
The headless, shattered golden God,
The dead priest's crushed divining-rod;
The captives, weak from blow and wound,
Toiling along; the maiden, bound
And helpless, in her raiment torn;
The ancient man's last day forlorn:

Onward they pressed, and though no sound
Their footfalls made upon the ground,
Most real indeed they seemed to be.
The spilt blood savoured horribly,
Heart-breaking the dumb writhings were,
Unuttered curses filled the air;
Yea, as the wretched band went past,
A dreadful look one woman cast
On Laurence, and upon his breast
A wounded blood-stained hand she pressed.

But on the heels of these there came
A King, that through the night did flame,
For something more than steel or brass
The matter of his armour was,
Its fashion strange past words to say;
Who knows where first it saw the day?
On a red horse he rode; his face
Gave no more hope of any grace
Than through the blackness of the night
The swift-descending lightning might;
And yet therein great joy indeed
The brightness of his eyes did feed;—
A joy as of the leaping fire
Over the house-roof rising higher
To greet the noon-sun, when the glaive
Forbids all folk to help or save.

Yet harmless this one passed him by,
And through the air deliciously
Faint pensive music breathed, and then
There came a throng of maids and men—
A young and fair and gentle band;
Whereof some passed him hand in hand,
Some side by side not touching walked,
As though of happy things they talked;
Noiseless they were like all the rest
As past him up the hill they pressed;
Yet she who brushed by him most close
Cast to his feet a fresh red rose.

Then somewhat of a space there was
Before the next band 'gan to pass,
So faint they moved for very woe;
And these were men and maids also,
And young were most, and most were fair;
And hand in hand some few went there,
And still were fain with love to see
Each other's bitter misery;
But most, just sundered, went along,
With faces drawn by hidden wrong,
Clenched hands and muttering lips that cursed
From brooding hearts their sin that nursed.
And she that went the last of all,
Black-robed, in passing by let fall
At Laurence's feet a black-bound wreath
Of bitter herbs long come to death.

Alone, afoot, when these were gone,
A bright one came, whose garments shone
In wondrous wise; a bow he bore,
And deadly feathered shafts' good store;
Winged was he and most Godlike fair;
Slowly he went, and oft would stare
With eyes distraught down on the grass,
As waiting what might come to pass;
Then whiles would he look up again
And set his teeth as if with pain;
And whiles for very joy of heart
His eyes would gleam, his lips would part
With such a smile as though the earth
Were newly made to give him mirth;
Back o'er his shoulder would he gaze
Seaward, or through the marshland haze
That lay before, strain long and hard,
Till fast the tears fell on the sward:—
So towards the hill's brow wandered he.

Then through the moaning of the sea
There came a faint and thrilling strain,
Till Laurence strove with tears in vain,
And his flesh trembled, part with fear,
Part as with some great pleasure near,
And then his dazzled eyes could see
Once more a noiseless company;
And his heart failed him at the sight,
And he forgot both wrong and right,
And nothing thought of his intent;
For close before him now there went
Fair women clad in ancient guise
That hid but little from his eyes
More loveliness than earth doth hold
Now, when her bones are growing old;
But all too swift they went by him,
And fluttering gown and ivory limb
Went twinkling up the bare hill-side,
And lonely there must he abide.

Then seaward had he nigh turned round,
And thus the end of life had found,
When even before his wildered sight
There glided forth a figure white,
And passed him by afoot, alone;
No raiment on her sweet limbs shone,
Only the tresses of her hair
The wind drove round her body fair;
No sandals were there on her feet,
But still before them blossoms sweet
Unnamed, unknown within that land,
Sprang up; she held aloft her hand
As to the trembling man she turned
Her glorious eyes, and on it burned
The dreadful pledge, the looked-for thing,
The well-wrought, lovely spousal ring.

Then Laurence trembled more and more;
Huge longing his faint heart swept o'er;
As one who would a boon beseech.
His fevered hand forth did he reach,
And then she stayed and gazed at him
Just moving lightly each fair limb
As one who loiters, but must go;
But even as the twain stood so,
She saying nought, he saying nought,
And who knows what wild wave of thought
Beating betwixt them, from his girth
The dread scroll loosened fell to earth,
And to his ears where sounds waxed dim
Louder its rustle seemed to him
Than loudest thunder; down he bent,
Remembering now his good intent,
And got the scroll within his hand;
And when mid prayers he came to stand
Upright again, then was she gone,
And he once more was left alone.

Foredone, bewildered, downcast now,
Heard he confuséd clamour grow;
And then swept onward through the night
A babbling crowd in raiment bright,
Wherein none listened aught at all
To what from other lips might fall,
And none might meet his fellow's gaze;
And stil o'er every restless face
Passed restless shades of rage and pain,
And sickening fear and longing vain.
On wound that manifold agony
Unholpen, vile, till earth and sea
Grew silent, till the moonlight died
Before a false light blaring wide,
And from amidst that fearful folk
The Lord of all the pageant broke.

Most like a mighty king was he,
And crowned and sceptred royally;
As a white flame his visage shone,
Sharp, clear-cut as a face of stone;
But flickering flame, not flesh, it was;
And over it such looks did pass
Of wild desire, and pain, and fear,
As in his people's faces were,
But tenfold fiercer: furthermore,
A wondrous steed the Master bore,
Unnameable of kind or make,
Not horse, nor hippogriff, nor drake.
Like and unlike to all of these,
And flickering like the semblances
Of an ill dream, wrought as in scorn
Of sunny noon, fresh eve, and morn,
That feed the fair things of the earth.
And now brake out a mock of mirth
From all that host, and all their eyes
Were turned on Laurence in strange wise.
Who met the maddening fear that burned
Round his unholpen heart, and turned
Unto the dreadful king and cried:
"What errand go ye on? Abide,
Abide! for I have tarried long;
Turn thou to me, and right my wrong!
One of thy servants keeps from me
That which I gave her not; nay, see
What thing thy Master bids thee do!"

Then wearily, as though he knew
How all should be, the Master turned,
And his red eyes on Laurence burned,
As without word the scroll he took;
But as he touched the skin, he shook,
As though for fear, and presently
In a great voice he 'gan to cry:
"Shall this endure for ever, Lord?
Hast thou no care to keep thy word?
And must such double men abide?
Not mine, not mine, nor on thy side?
For as thou cursest them, I curse:—
Make thy souls better, Lord, or worse!"

Then spake he to the trembling man,
"What I am bidden, that I can;
Bide here, and thou shalt see thine own
Unto thy very feet cast down;
Then go and dwell in peace awhile."
Then round he turned with sneering smile,
And once more lonely was the night,
And colourless with grey moonlight.

But soon indeed the dawn drew near,
As Laurence stood 'twixt hope and fear,
Still doubting, now that all was gone,
If his own heart the thing had done,
Though on his coat the blood-mark was,
Though rose and wreath lay on the grass.
So long he waited wearily,
Until, when dawn 'gan stripe the sky,
If he were waking scarce he knew,
When, as he deemed, a white cloud drew
Anigh him from the marshland grey,
Over the empty ghost-trod way,
And from its midst a voice there came:
"*Thou who hast wrought me added shame,*
Take back thine own and go thy ways;
And think, perchance, in coming days,
When all grows old about thee, how
From foolish hands thou needs must throw
A gift of unhoped great delight."
It vanished as the east grew bright,
And in the shadowless still morn
A sense of rest to him was born,
And looking down unto his feet,

His eyes the spousal-ring did meet.
He caught it up with a glad cry,
And kissed it over longingly,
And set it on his hand again;
And dreamlike now, and vague and vain,
Seemed all those images of fear,
The wicked sights that held him there;
And rather now his eyes could see
Her that was his now verily.

Then from that drear unhallowed place
With merry heart he set his face.
A light wind o'er the ocean blew,
And fresh and fair the young day grew;
The sun rose o'er the green sea's rim,
And gave new life and joy to him;
The white birds crying o'er his head
Seemed praising all his hardihead,
And laughing at the worsted foe;
So, joyous, onward did he go,
And in a little sheltered bay
His weariness he washed away,
And made afresh on toward the town:
He met the fish-wife coming down
From her red cottage to the strand,
The fisher-children hand in hand
Over some wonder washed ashore;
The old man muttering words of lore
About the wind that was to be;
And soon the white sails specked the sea,
And fisher-keel on fisher-keel
The furrowed sand again did feel,
And round them many a barefoot maid
The burden on her shoulders laid,
While unto rest the fishers went,
And grumbling songs from rough throats sent.

Now all is done, and he at last,
Weary, but full of joy, has passed
Over his threshold once again,
And scarce believed is all the pain
And all the fear that he has had,
Now night and day shall make him glad.

As for Palumbus, tossed about
His soul might be in dread and doubt,
In rest at least his body lay
Ere the great bell struck noon that day.
And soon a carver did his best
To make an image of that rest,
Nor aught of gold did Laurence spare
To make his tomb both rich and fair;
And o'er his clasped hands and his head
Thereafter many a mass was said.

So when the tale was clean done, with a smile
The old priest looked around a little while,
That grew, as young and old 'gan say their say
On that strange dream of time long passed away;
So listening, with his pleased and thoughtful look
He 'gan turn o'er the worn leaves of his book,
Half noting at the first the flowers therein,
Drawn on the margin of the yellowing skin
Where chapters ended; or fair images
Of kings and lords amidst of war and peace
At books' beginnings; till within a space
His eyes grew fixed upon a certain place,
And he seemed reading. Was it then the name
Of some old town before his eyes that came,
And drew his thoughts there? Did he see it now?
The bridge across the river choked with snow;
The pillared market-place, not thronged this eve;
The muffled goodwives making haste to leave
The gusty minster porch, whose windows shone
With the first-litten candles; while the drone
Of the great organ shook the leaded panes,
And the wind moaned about the turret vanes?
—Nought changed there, and himself so changed
mid change,
That the next land—Death's land—would seem
nought strange
To his awakening eyes!
Ah! good and ill,
When will your strife the fated measure fill?
When will the tangled veil be drawn away,
To show us all that unimagined day?

FEBRUARY.

NOON—and the north-west sweeps the empty road,
The rain-washed fields from hedge to hedge are bare;
Beneath the leafless elms some hind's abode
Looks small and void, and no smoke meets the air
From its poor hearth: one lonely rook doth dare
The gale, and beats above the unseen corn,
Then turns, and whirling down the wind is borne.

Shall it not hap that on some dawn of May
Thou shalt awake, and, thinking of days dead,
See nothing clear but this same dreary day,
Of all the days that have passed o'er thine head?
Shalt thou not wonder, looking from thy bed,
Through green leaves on the windless east a-fire,
That this day too thine heart doth still desire?

Shalt thou not wonder that it liveth yet,
The useless hope, the useless craving pain,
That made thy face, that lonely noontide, wet
With more than beating of the chilly rain?
Shalt thou not hope for joy new born again,
Since no grief ever born can ever die
Through changeless change of seasons passing by?

THE change has come at last, and from the west
Drives on the wind, and gives the clouds no rest,
And ruffles up the water thin that lies
Over the surface of the thawing ice;
Sunrise and sunset with no glorious show
Are seen, as late they were across the snow;
The wet-lipped west wind chilleth to the bone
More than the light and flickering east hath done.
Full soberly the earth's fresh hope begins,
Nor stays to think of what each new day wins:
And still it seems to bid us turn away
From this chill thaw to dream of blossomed May:
E'en as some hapless lover's dull shame sinks
Away sometimes in day-dreams, and he thinks
No more of yesterday's disgrace and foil,
No more he thinks of all the sickening toil
Of piling straw on straw to reach the sky;
But rather now a pitying face draws nigh,
Mid tears and prayers for pardon; and a tale
To make love tenderer now is all the bale
Love brought him erst.
But on this chill dank tide
Still are the old men by the fireside,
And all things cheerful round the day just done
Shut out the memory of the cloud-drowned sun,
And dripping bough and blotched and snow-soaked earth;
And little as the tide seemed made for mirth,
Scarcely they lacked it less than months agone,
When on their wrinkles bright the great sun shone;
Rather, perchance, less pensive now they were,
And meeter for that cause old tales to hear
Of stirring deeds long dead:
So, as it fell,
Preluding nought, an elder 'gan to tell
The story promised in mid-winter days
Of all that latter end of bliss and praise
That erst befell Bellerophon the bright,
Ere all except his name sank into night.

BELLEROPHON IN LYCIA.

ARGUMENT.

Bellerophon bore unawares to Jobates King of Lycia the deadly message of King Prœtus: wherefore the Lycian King threw him often in the way of death, but the Fates willed him not to perish so, but gave him rather great honour and a happy life.

LO ye have erst heard how Bellerophon
Left Argos with his fortune all undone,
Well deeming why, and with a certain scorn,
Rather than anger, in his heart new-born,
To mingle with old courage, and the hope
That yet with life's wild tangle he might cope
Nor be so wholly beaten in the end.
Whatever pain he gat from failing friend,
And earth made lonely for his feet again,
The brightness of his youth might nowise wane
Before it, or his hardihood grow dim.

So now the evening sun shines fair on him
In Lycia, as he goes up from the quays,
Well pleased beneath the new folk's curious gaze
With all the fair things that his eyes behold.
As goodly as the tale was that men told
Of King Jobates' city, goodlier
Than all they told, it seemeth to him here.
And mid things new and strange and fairly wrought
Small care he hath for any anxious thought.
And so amid the shipmen's company
He came unto the King's hall, builded high
Above the market-place, and no delay
In getting speech of the great King had they,
For ever King Jobates' wont it was
To learn of new-comers things brought to pass
In outlands, and he served in noble wise
Such guests as might seem tr: ty to his eyes.
So in the midmost of his company
He passed in through the hall, and seemed to be
A very god chance-come among them there,
Though little splendid soothly was his gear;
A bright steel helm upon his brows he had,
And in a dark blue kirtle was he clad,
And a grey cloak thereover; bright enow
With gold and gems his great sword's hilt did glow,
But no such thing was in aught else he wore;
A spear great-shafted his strong right hand bore,
And in his left King Prœtus' casket shone:
Grave was his face now, though there played thereon
A flickering smile, that erst you might have seen
In such wise play, when small space was between
The spears he led and fierce eyes of the foe.
Thus through the Lycian court-folk did they go
Till to the King they came: e'en such a man
As sixty summers made not pinched or wan,
Though beard and hair alike were white as snow.
Down on the sea-farers did he gaze now
With curious peering eyes, and now and then
He smiled and nodded, as he saw such men
Amidst them as he knew in other days;
But when he met Bellerophon's frank gaze,
There his eyes rested, and he said: "O guest,
Though among these thy gear is not the best,
Yet know I no man more if thou art not
E'en that Bellerophon, who late hast got
Such praise mid men of Argos, that thy name
Two months agone to this our country came,
Adorned with many tales of deeds of thine;
And certainly as of a man divine
Thy mien is and thy face: how sayest thou?"

"So am I called," he said, "mid all men now
Since that unhappy day that drave me forth,
Lacking that half that was of greatest worth,
And made me worthy—for my deeds, O King,
What I have done is but a little thing;
I wrought that I might live from day to day,
That something I might give for hire and pay
Unto my lord; from whom I bring to thee
A message written by him privily,
Hid in this casket: take it from my hand,
And do thou worthily to this my band,
And let us soon depart, for I am fain
The good report of other men to gain,
Wide through the world;—nor do thou keep me here

As one unto King Prœtus' heart right dear,
Because I deem that I have done amiss
Unto him, though I wot not how it is
That I have sinned: certes he bade me flee,
And ere he went my face he would not see;
Therefore I bid thee, King, to have a care
Lest on a troublous voyage thou shouldst fare."

"Sweet is thy voice," the King said; "many a maid
Among our fairest would be well a-paid
In listening to thy words a summer day.
Nor will our honour let thee go away
Whatso thy deed is, though I deem ful well
But little ill there is of thee to tell.
Give forth the casket; in good time will we
This message of the King of Argos see,
And do withal what seemeth good therein.
Sit ye, O guests, for supper doth begin!—
Ho! marshals, give them room; but thou, sit here,
And gather heart the deeds of Kings to bear
While yet thou mayst, and here with me rejoice,
Forgetting much; for certes in thy voice
Was wrath e'en now, and unmeet anger is
To mingle with our short-lived spell of bliss."

Then sat Bellerophon adown and thought
How fate his wandering footsteps erst had brought
To such another place, and of the end,
Whate'er it was, that fate to him did send.
Yet since the time was fair, and day by day
Ever some rag of fear he cast away,
And ever less doubt of himself he had,
In that bright concourse was he blithe and glad,
And the King blessed the fair and merry tide
That set so blithe a fellow by his side.

BUT the next day, in honour of the guest,
The King bade deck all chambers with his best,
And bid all folk to joyous festival,
And let the heralds all the fair youth call
To play within the lists at many a game;
"Since here last eve the great Corinthian came
That ye have heard of: and though ye indeed
Of more than manly strength may well have need
To match him, do your best, lest word he bear
That now too soft the Lycian folk live here,
Forgetting whence their fathers came of yore
And whom their granddames to their grandsires bore."

So came the young men thronging, and withal
Before the altars did the oxen fall
To many a god; the well-washed fleeces fair
In their own bearers' blood were dyed, and there
The Persian merchants stood and snuffed the scent
Of frankincense, for which of old they went
Through plain and desert waterless, and faced
The lion-haunted woods that edged the waste.
Then in the lists were couched the pointless spears,
The oiled sleek wrestler struggled with his peers,
The panting runner scarce could see the crown
Held by white hands before his visage brown;
The horses, with no hope of gold or gain,
With fluttering hearts remembered not the rein
Nor thought of earth. And still all things fared so,
That all who with the hero had to do
Deemed him too strong for mankind; or if one
Gained seeming victory on Bellerophon,
He knew it for a courteous mockery
Granted to him. So did the day go by,
And others like it, and the talk still was
How even now such things could come to pass
That such a man upon the earth was left.

But when the ninth sun from the earth had reft
Silence, and rest from care, then the King sent
To see Bellerophon, who straightly went,
And found Jobates with a troubled face,
Pacing a chamber of the royal place
From end to end, who turned as he drew near,
And said in a low voice, "What dost thou here?
This is a land with many dangers rife;
Hast thou no heed to save thy joyous life?
The wide sea is before thee, get thee gone,
All lands are good for thee but this alone!"

And as the hero strove to catch his eye
And 'gan to speak, he passed him hurriedly,
And gat him from the chamber: with a smile
Bellerophon turned too within a while,
When he could gather breath from such a speech,
And said, "Far then King Prœtus' arm can reach:
So was it as I doubted; yet withal
Not everything to every king will fall
As he desires it, and the Gods are good;
Nor shall the Lycian herbage drink my blood:—
The Gods are good, though far they drive me forth;
But the four quarters, south, west, east, and north,
All are alike to me, who therein have
None left me now to weep above my grave
Whereso I fall: and fair things shall I see,
Nor may great deeds be lacking unto me:—
Would I were gone then!"

But with that last word
Light footsteps drawing swiftly nigh he heard,
And made a shift therewith his eyes to raise,
Then staggering back, bewildered with amaze,
Caught at the wall and wondered if he dreamed,
For there before his very eyes he seemed
To see the Lycian Sthenobœa draw nigh:

But as he strove with his perplexity
A soft voice reached his ears, and then he knew
That in one mould the Gods had fashioned two,
But given them hearts unlike; yea, and her eyes
Looked on his troubled face in no such wise
As had the other's; wistful these and shy,
And seemed to pray, Use me not cruelly,
I have not harmed thee.—Thus her soft speech ran:

"Far have I sought thee, O Corinthian man,
And now that I have found thee my words fail,
Though erst my heart had taught me well my tale."

She paused, her half-closed lips were e'en as sweet
As the sweet sounds that thence the air did meet,
And such a sense swept o'er Bellerophon
As whiles in spring had come, and lightly gone
Ere he could name it; like a wish it was,
A wish for something that full swift did pass
To be forgotten.
Some three paces were
Betwixt them when she first had spoken there,
But now, as though it were unwittingly,
He slowly moved a little more anigh;
But she flushed red now ere she spake once more,
And faltered and looked down upon the floor.

"O Prince Bellerophon," at last she said,
"I dreamed last night that I beheld thee dead;
I knew thee thus, for twice had I seen thee,
Unseen myself, in this festivity;
And since I know how loved a man thou art,
Here have I come, to bid thee to depart,
Since that thou mayst do yet."
Nigher he came
And said, "O fair one, I am but a name
To thee, as men are to the Gods above;
And what thing, then, thy heart to this did move?"

So spake he, knowing scarce what words he said,
Strange his own voice seemed to him; and the maid
Spake not at first, but grew pale, and there passed
A quivering o'er her lips; but at the last,
With eyes fixed full upon him, thus she spake:

"Why should I lie? this did I for thy sake,
Because thou art the worthiest of all men,
The loveliest to look on. Hear me, then;
But ere my tale is finished, speak thou not,
Because this moment has my heart waxed hot,
And I can speak before I go my way—
Before thou leav'st me.—On my bed I lay,
And dreamed I fared within the Lycian land,
And still about me there on either hand
Were nought but poisonous serpents, yet no dread
I had of them, for soothly in my head
The thought was, that my kith and kin they were;
But as I went methought I saw thee there
Coming on toward me, and thou mad'st as though
No whit about those fell worms thou didst know;
And then in vain I strove to speak to thee,
And bid thee get thee down unto the sea,
Where bode thy men ready at bench and mast;
But in my dream thou cam'st unto me fast,
And unto speech we fell of e'en such things
As please the sons and daughters of great kings;
And I must smile and talk, and talk and smile,
Though I beheld a serpent all the while
Draw nigh to strike thee: then—then thy lips
came
Close unto mine; and while with joy and shame
I trembled, in my ears a dreadful cry
Rang, and thou fellest from me suddenly
And lay'st dead at my feet: and then I spake
Unto myself, 'Would God that I could wake,'
But woke not, though my dream changed utterly,
Except that thou wert laid stark dead anigh.
Then in this palace were we, and the noise
Of many folk I heard, and a great voice
Rang o'er it ever and again, and said,
Bellerophon who would not love is dead.
But I—I moved not from thee, but I saw
Through the fair windows many people draw
Unto the lists, until withal it seemed
As though I never yet had slept or dreamed,
That all the games went on, where yesterday
Thou like a god amidst of men didst play:
But yet through all, the great voice cried and said,
Bellerophon who would not love is dead.
This is the dream—ah, hast thou heard me, then?
Abide no more, I say, among these men:
Think'st thou the world without thy life can thrive,
More than my heart without thy heart can live?"

Almost before her lips the words could say,
She turned her eager glittering eyes away,
And hurried past, and as her feet did bear
Her loveliness away, he seemed to hear
A sob come from her; but for him, he felt
As in some fair heaven all his own he dwelt,
As though he ne'er of any woe had known,
So happy and triumphant had he grown.
But when he thus a little while had stood
With this new pleasure stirring all his blood,
He 'gan to think how that she was not there,
And 'thwart the glory of delight came care,
As uttermost desire so wrought in him,
That now in strange new tears his eyes did swim,
He scarce knew if for pleasure or for pain.
Of other things he strove to think in vain—
Nought seemed they;—the strange threatening of
the King,
Nay the maid's dream—it seemed a little thing
That he should read their meaning more than this:

"Here in the land of Lycia dwells thy bliss;
So much she loved thee that she wished thee gone,
That thou mightst live, though she were left alone;
Or else she had not left thee; failing not
To see how all the heart in thee waxed hot
To cast thine arms about her and to press
Her heart to thine and heal its loneliness."
Pity grew in him as he thought thereof,
And with its sweet content fed burning love,
Till all his life was swallowed by its flame,
And dead and passed away were fear and shame,
Nor might he think that he could ever die.

But now at last he with a passionate sigh
Turned from the place where he had seen her feet,
And murmured as he went, "O sweet, O sweet,
O sweet the fair morn that thou breathest in,
When thou, awakening lone, dost first begin
For one more day the dull blind world to bless
With sight of thine unmeasured loveliness."

So speaking, through a low door did he gain
A little garden; the fair morn did wane,
The day grew to its hottest, the warm air
Was little stirred, the o'er-sweet lily there
With unbowed stem let fall upon the ground
Its fainting leaves; full was the air of sound
Of restless bees; from high elms far away
Came the doves' moan about the lost spring day,
And Venus' sparrows twittered in the eaves
Above his head. There 'twixt the languid leaves
And o'er-blown blossoms he awhile did go,
Nursing his love till faint he 'gan to grow
For very longing, and love, bloomed an hour,
Began to show the thorn about the flower,
Yet sweet and sweet it was, until the thought
Of that departing to his mind was brought,
And though he laughed aloud with scorn of it,
Yet images of pain and death would flit
Across his love, until at last anew
He 'gan to think that deeds there were to do
In his old way, if there he still would bide.
Deeds must have birth from hope; grief must he hide,
And into hard resolve his longing chill,
If he would be god-loved and conquering still:
So back he turned into the house, in mind,
Whatso might hap, the King once more to find,
And crave for leave to serve him; for he deemed,
Whate'er the King had warned or his love dreamed,
That he and youth 'gainst death were fellows twain
For years yet, whoso in the end should gain.

Deep buried in his thoughts he went, but when
He drew anigh the hall a crowd of men
Were round about it; armed they were, indeed,
But rent and battered was their warlike weed,
And some lacked wounding weapons; some men leant
Weakly 'gainst pillars; some were so much spent
They wept for weariness and pain; no few
Bore bandages the red blood struggled through;
E'en such they seemed, the hero thought, as folk
That erst before his Argive spears had broke,
And at his feet their vain arms down had cast:
So, wondering thereat, through these folk he passed
Into the hall, where on the ivory throne
Jobates sat, with flushed face, gazing down
Upon the shrinking captains; therewithal
E'en as he entered did the King's eyes fall
Upon him, and the King somewhat did start
At first, but then, as minding not the part
That he had played that morn, a gracious smile
Came o'er his face; then spake he in a while:
"Look upon these, O wise Bellerophon,
And ask of them what glory they have won—
Or ask them not, but listen unto me:
Over the mountain-passes that men see
Herefrom, a town there is, and therein dwell
Folk baser and more vile than men can tell;
A godless folk, without a law or priest;
A thankless folk, who at high-tide and feast
Remember not the Gods; no image there
Makes glad men's eyes, no painted story fair
Tells of past days; alone, unhelped they live,
And nought but curses unto any give:
A rude folk, nothing worth, without a head
To lead them forth,—and this morn had I said
A feeble folk and bondsmen of mine own.
But now behold from this same borel town
Are these men empty-handed now come back,
And midst these Solymi is little lack
This morn of well-wrought swords and silk attire
And gold that seven times o'er has felt the fire,
"Lo now, thou spak'st of wandering forth again—
Rather be thou my man, and 'gainst these men
Lead thou mine army; nay, nor think to win
But little praise if thou dost well herein,
For these by yesterday are grown so great
That if thou winnest them, midst this red heat
Of victory, a great deed shalt thou do,
And great will thy reward be; wilt thou go?
Methought thou hadst a mind to serve me here."

So, as Bellerophon drew more anear,
He thought within his heart, "Ah, then, I know
From all these things why he would have me go;
Yet since indeed I may not quite depart
From Lycia now, because my new-smitten heart
Is bound with bonds of love unto the land,
Safer am I in armour, sword in hand,
Than midst these silken hangings and fair things,
That well I wot hide many poison-stings:

The Gods are great, nor midst of men am I
Of such as, once being threatened, quickly die."

Then he spake out: "O King, wilt thou then pray
To all the Gods to give me a good day?
For when I was a youth and dwelt at home
Men deemed I knew somewhat of things to come,
And now methinks more dangers I foresee
Than any that have yet been forged for me."

The King frowned at that word, and flushed blood-red,
As if against his will; but quickly said,
In a mild voice: "Be of good cheer, O son;
For if the Gods help not Bellerophon
They will not have to say, that in this land
I prayed their good-will for thee with close hand.
No god there is that hath an altar here
That shall not smoke with something he holds dear
While thou art absent from us—but these men,
Worn as they are, are fain to try again,
As swiftly as may be, what from the Fates
In bloody fields the Lycian name awaits;
Mine armoury is not empty; yet there are
Unwounded men to furnish forth the war—
Yea, and mine household-folk shall go with thee,
And none but women in mine house shall be,
Until the Lycian shield once more is clean
Through thee, as though no stain had ever been.
Canst thou be ready by the second day
Unto the Solymi to take thy way?"

"So be it," said the wise Corinthian;
"And here, O King, I make myself thy man—
May the Gods make us faithful; but if worse
Must happen, on his head fall all the curse
Who does the wrong!—Now for thy part see thou
That we who go have everything enow;
Nor think to hear too soon of victory;
For though a spliced staff e'en as strong may be
As one ne'er broken, lean thou not thereon
Till o'er the narrow way thy feet have won
And thou may'st try it on the level grass.
Now give me leave, for I am fain to pass
Thy men in order by me, and to find
How best thy wounded honour I may bind."

Then first the hero's hand the King's hand took;
But ill belike Jobates that did brook,
And well-nigh drew it back; yet still it lay
And moved not, and the King made haste to say:

"May the Gods bless us both, as I bless thee,
Who at this tide givest good help to me!
Depart, brave man; and, doing but thy best,
Howe'er fate goes, by me shalt thou be blest."

Then went Bellerophon, and laboured sore
To give the Lycian folk good heart once more,
Till day passed into night, and in fair dream
And hopeful waking, happy love did gleam,
E'en like the young sun, on the hero's head.
But when the next bright day was well-nigh dead,
Within the brazen porch Bellerophon
Stood thinking o'er all things that had been done.
Alone he was, and yearning for his love,
And longing for some deed the truth to prove
Of what seemed dreamlike now, midst all the stir
Of men and clash of arms; and wearier
He felt than need was, as the evening breeze
Raised up his hair. But while sweet images
His heart made now of what he once had seen,
There in the dusk, across the garden green,
A white thing fluttered; nor was steadier
His heart within him, as he thought ot her,
And that perchance she came; and soon anigh
A woman drew, but stopping presently
Over against him, he could see her now
To be a handmaid, and, with knitted brow,
Was going thence, but through the dusk she cried:
"O fair my lord Bellerophon, abide
And hearken—here my lady sendeth me,
And saith these words withal:

Philonoè,
Born of the Lycian King, doth give thee this
Fair blade, and prayeth for thee health and bliss;
Saying, moreover; as for this same sword,
Draw it not forth before base man or lord,
But be alone when first it leaves the sheath;
Yet since upon it lieth life and death,
Surely thou wilt not long delay to see
The face of that bright friend I give to thee."

He felt the cold hilt meet his outstretched hand,
And she was gone, nor longer did he stand
Than but to look if any stood thereby,
Then gat him gone therefrom, and presently
Was lone within his chamber; there awhile
He stood regarding with a lovesome smile
The well-wrought sword, and fairly was it dight
With gold and gems; then by the taper's light
He drew it from the sheath, and, sooth to tell,
E'en that he hoped for therewithal befell,
Because a letter lay 'twixt blade and sheath,
Which straight he opened, and nigh held his breath
For very eagerness, the while he read:

Short is the time, and yet enow, it said,
Night-fall it will be when thou readest this.
If thou wouldst live yet, for the weal and bliss
Of many, gird this sword to thee, and go
Down to the quay, and there walk to and fro,
Until a sea-farer thou meetest there,
With two behind him who shall torches bear;
He shall behold the sword, and say to thee,

"Is it drawn forth?" and say "Yea, verily,
And the wound healed." Then shall he bring thee straight
Unto his keel, which with loose sails doth wait
Thy coming, and shall give thee gold good store,
Nor bide the morn to leave the Lycian shore.—
Farewell; I would have seen thee, but I feared—
—I feared two things; first, that we might be heard
By green trees and by walls, and thus should I
Have brought the death on thee I bid thee fly;
The first—but for the second, since I speak
Now for the last time—Love has made me weak;
I feared my heart made base by sudden bliss—
I feared—wilt thou be wroth who readest this?—
Mine eyes I saw in thine that other tide;
I thought perchance that here thou mightst abide,
Constrained by Love.
Now if I have said ill,
Shall not my soul of sorrow have its fill?
I sin, but bitter death shall pay therefor.

He read the piteous letter o'er and o'er,
Till fell the tears thereon like sudden rain,
For he was young, and might not love again
With so much pleasure, such sweet bitterness,
Such hope amid that new-born sharp distress
Of longing; half-content to love and yearn,
Until perchance the fickle wheel might turn.

The well-kissed sword within his belt he set,
But ye may well deem was more minded yet
To bide his fortune in the Lycian land,
What fear soe'er before his path might stand;
And great his soul grew, thinking of the tide
When every hindrance should be thrust aside,
And love should greet him; calm, as though the death,
He knew so nigh him, on some distant heath
Were sitting, flame-bound, waiting for the word
Himself should give; with hand upon his sword,
Unto the hall he took his way: therein
Was growing great and greater joyful din,
For there they drank unto the coming day;
And as through all that crowd he made his way,
The shouts rose higher round him, and his name
Beat hard about the stony ears of Fame.

So then beside the Lycian King he sat
A little while, and spake of this and that,
E'en as a man grown mighty; and at last
Some few words o'er that feasting folk he cast,
Proud, mingling sharp rebuke with confidence,
And bade them feast no more, but going thence
Make ready straight to live or die like men.
And therewithal did he depart again
Amidst them, and for half the night he went
Hither and thither, on such things intent
As fit the snatcher-forth of victory;
And then, much wondering how such things could be,
That aught but love could move a man at all,
Into a dreamless slumber did he fall,
Wherefrom the trumpet roused him in the morn
Almost before the summer sun was born;
And midst the new-born longings of his heart,
From that fair place now must he needs depart
Unguarded and unholpen to his fate.

Nought happed to him 'twixt palace-court and gate
Of the fair city; thronged it was e'en then
With anxious, weeping women and pale men,
But unto him all faces empty were
But one, that nowise might he now see there:
Or ere he passed the great gate back he gazed
To where the palace its huge pile upraised
Unto the fresh and windy morning sky,
As seeking if he might e'en now espy
That which he durst not raise his eyes unto
When 'neath its walls he went a while ago.

So through the gate the last man strode, and they
Who in the city seemed so great a stay
Unto that people, as the country-side
About their moving ranks spread bleak and wide,
Showed like a handful, and the town no less
Seemed given up to utter helplessness.

SEVEN days of fear wore by; Philonoë
Must vex her heart with all that yet might be,
And oft would curse herself that she it was
Through whom such death as his should come to pass,
And weep to think of all her life made lone.
But on the eighth day, at the stroke of noon,
A little band of stained and battered men
Passed through the gate into the town again,
And left glad hearts as well as anxious ones
Behind them, as they clattered o'er the stones
Unto the palace: there the King they found
Set on his throne, with ancient lords around,
And cried to him, "O King, rejoice! at last
Raised is thy banner, that ill men had cast
Unto the ground; as safely mayst thou lie
Within the city of the Solymi
As in this house thou buildedst for thy bliss,
For all things there are thine now, e'en as this."

Then the King rose, and filled a cup with wine,
And said, "All praise be unto things divine!
Yet ere I pour, how goes it with our folk?
Did many die before they laid the yoke
On these proud necks? when will they come again?"

"O King," they said, "though they fell not in vain,
Yet many fell; but now upon the way
Our fellows are: I think on the third day
They will be here, and needs must they be slow,
Because they have with them a goodly show;
Wains full of spoil, arms, and most fair attire,
Wrought gold that seven times o'er has felt the fire;
And men and women of thy stubborn foes
E'en as thou wilt their lives to keep or lose."

"What sayest thou next about Bellerophon,"
The King said, "that this day for me hath won?
Is he alive yet?"
Then the man waxed pale,
And said, "He liveth, and of small avail
Man's weapons are against him; on the wall
He stood alone, for backward did we fall
Before the fury of the Solymi,
Because we deemed ourselves brought there to die,
And might not bear it: then it was as though
A clear bright light about his head did glow
Amidst the darts and clamour, and he turned
A face to us that with such glory burned
That those behind us drave us back again,
And cried aloud to die there in the pain
Rather than leave him, and with such a wave
Of desperate war swept up, they scarce could save
Their inmost citadel from us that tide,
Who at the first with mocks had bidden us bide
A little longer in a freeman's land,
Until their slaves had got their whips in hand
To drive us thence."
Now as he spake, at first
The King like one, who heareth of the worst,
And must not heed it, hearkened, but when he
Had heard his servant's tale out, suddenly
The wine he poured, and cried, "Jove, take thou this
In token of the greatness of our bliss,
In earnest of the gifts that thou shalt have,
Who thus our name, our noble friends didst save."
So spake he, looking downward, and his heart
In what his lips said, had perchance some part,
However, driven on by long-sworn oath,
He dealt in things that sore he needs must loathe:
And he who erst had told him of the thing
Seemed fain to linger, as if yet the King
Had something more to say; but no fresh word
He had for him, but with great man and lord
Made merry, praising wind and wave
That brought Bellerophon their fame to save.

But joyous was the town to hear of this,
For in that place, midst all that men call bliss,
Cold fear was mingled; such a little band
They seemed, but clinging to a barbarous land
With strange things round about them; if the earth
Should open not to swallow up their mirth
And them together, they must deem it good;
Or if the kennels ran not with their blood,
While a poor remnant, driven forth with whips,
Must sit beneath the hatchways of strange ships,
Of such account as beasts. So there dwelt they,
Trembling amidst their wealth from day to day,
Afraid of god and man, and earth and sky.
Judge, therefore, if they thought not joyously
Of this one fallen amongst them, who could make
The rich man risk his life for honour's sake,
The trembling slave remember what he was,
The poor man hope for what might come to pass.
So when the day came when the gates were flung
Back on their hinges, and the people hung
About the pageant of their folk returned,
And many an eager face about him burned
With new and high desires they scarce could name,
He wondered how such glory on him came,
And why folk gazed upon him as a god,
And would have kissed the ground whereon he trod.
A little thing it seemed to him to fight
Against hard things, that he might see the light
A little longer and rejoice therein.
A little thing that he should strive to win
More time for love; and even therewithal
Into a dreamy musing did he fall
Amidst the shouts and glitter, and scarce knew
What things they were that he that day did do,
Only the time seemed long and long and long,
The noise and many men still seemed to wrong
The daintiness of his heart-piercing love—
As through a world of shadows did he move.

Think then how fared his love Philonoë
Amid the din of that festivity!
For if while joy hung betwixt hope and fear
Life seemed a hateful thing to her and dear,
And all men hateful; if herself she cursed,
The hatefullest of all things and the worst;
If rest had grown a name for something gone
And not remembered; if herself alone
Seemed no more one, but made of many things
All wretched and at strife; if sudden stings
Of fresh pain made her start up from her place,
And set to some strange unknown goal her face,
And she must stifle wails with bitterest pain—
If all this was, ought she not now to gain
A little rest? now, when she heard the voice
Of triumph and the people's maddening noise
Round her returning love; still did she bear
Her grinding dread if with a wearier,
Yet with a calmer face, than now she bore
Desire so quickened by that fear passed o'er.
She in her garden wandered through the day,
And heavy seemed the hours to pass away.

Her colour came and went, she trembled when
She heard some louder shout of joyous men;
She could not hear the things her maidens spake,
Nor aught could she seem gracious for their sake;
The sweetest snatch of some familiar song
She might not hearken; she abode not long
Within the shadow; weary of the sun
She grew full soon; the glassy brook did run
In vain across her feet; the ice-cold well
Quenched not her thirst; the half-blown roses' smell
Was not yet sweet enough: the sun sank low,
And then she murmured that the day must go
That should have been so happy: wearily,
She laid her down that night, but nought slept she:
Yet in the morn the new sun seemed to bring
A joy to her, and some unnamed dear thing
Better than rest or peace; for in her heart
She knew that he in all her thoughts had part;
Yea, and she thought how dreamlike he would ride
Amidst his glory, and how ill abide
The clamour of the feast; yea, and would not
That night to him belike be dull and hot,
And that dawn hopeful?
'Neath the wall there was
A place where dewy was the daisied grass
E'en nigh the noon; a high tower great and round
Cast a long shadow o'er that spot of ground,
And blind it was of window or of door:
For, wrought by long-dead men of ancient lore
No part it was of that stone panoply
That girt the town; so lilies grew thereby,
And woodbine, and the odorous virgin's-bower
Hung in great heaps about that undyked old tower,
And lone and silent was the pleasance there.
Thither Love led Philonoë the fair,
And well she knew of him, and still her heart
At every little sound and sight would start,
And still her palms were tingling for the touch
Of other hands, and ever over-much
Her feet seemed light.
But when the bushes gleamed
With something more than the low sun that streamed
Athwart their blossoms, and a clear voice rung
Above the ousel's; then with terror stung,
She leaned her slim and perfect daintiness
'Gainst the grey tower, and even like distress
Her great joy seemed. Green clad he was that morn,
And to his side there hung a glittering horn,
A mighty unbent bow was in his hand,
And o'er his shoulders did the feathers stand
Of his long arrows; in his gleaming eyes
Such joy there was, as he beheld the prize,
That in that shadow now he seemed to be
A piece of sunlight fallen down suddenly.

So face to yearning face they stood awhile,
And every word at first seemed poor and vile,
None better than another; nor durst they
Lips upon lips or palm to fingers lay,
More than if many people stood around,
With such strange fear and shame doth love abound.

At last she spake: "Thou comest, then, to say
How thou wilt now be wise and go away,
E'en as I bade; the prey has 'scaped the net;
Be wise, the fowler other wiles hath yet!"

"Yea," said he, "then thy word it was indeed
That needs must think about me in my need:
Strange, then, that now thou biddest me begone!
Belike thou know'st not of folk left alone,
And what life grows to them: yet art thou kind—
Thou deemest other friends I yet may find.
Alas, life goeth fast; not every day
Do we behold folk standing in the way
With outstretched hands to meet us."
"Ah," she said,
"How sweet thou art! and yet the dead are dead,
The absent are but dead a little while.
Then get thee gone from midst of wrong and guile,
And we shall meet once more in happier days,
When death lurks not amidst of rosy ways—
—Ah, wilt thou slay me, then?—I knew not erst
How poor a life I had, and how accurst,
Before I felt thy lips—what thing is this
That makes me faint amidst of new-born bliss?"

"Rest in mine arms, O well-beloved," said he;
"I faint not, neither shall death come on me
While thus thou art: nay, nay, I think if I,
Hacked with an hundred swords, should come to lie,
Yet without thee I should not then depart."

"O love, alas! the sorer is my heart
The more I love," she said, "we are alone;
Our loving life is not for any one
But for our own selves—ah, deem all I said
Before those lips of thine on mine were laid
As said again and yet again! Some hate
Is round thee here, some undeserved strange fate
Awaits thee here in Lycia—yea, full sure
The hungry swords here may we twain endure;
But what then?—Of the dead what hast thou heard
That maketh thee so rash and unafeard?
Can the dead love, or is there any space
In their long sleep when they lay face to face
Soft as we do now? can their pale lips plead
The pleas of love? or can their fixed eyes lead
Heart unto heart? or hast thou heard that they
Can wait from weary day to weary day,
And hope, as I will, while thou gatherest fame?
Can they have pleasure there e'en in a name,

A memory? is their pain a pleasure there,
Are tears sweet, and the longing sobs that wear
The hours away, where life and hope are gone?
"How can I any longer be alone?
Can I forget thee now the while I live?
O my beloved, must I strive and strive,
And move thee not? How sweet thou art to me!
How dull the coming day that knows not thee!"

"Fear not," he said; "not yet my days are done!
When on the deadly wall I stood alone,
And back the traitors fell from me, I felt
As though within me such a life there dwelt
As scarce could end—Lo now, if I depart
I lack the safeguard of thy faithful heart,
And meet new dangers that thou know'st not of.
Yea, listen, nor rebuke me—This our love;
Hast thou not heard how love may grow a-cold
Before the lips that called thereon wax old?
Ah, listen! seas betwixt us, and great pain,
And death of days that shall not be again;
And yearning life within us, and desire
That changes hearts as fire will quench the fire.
These are the engines of the Gods, lest we,
Through constant love, Gods too should come to be.
A little pain, a little fond regret,
A little shame, and we are living yet,
While love that should out-live us lieth dead—

"Ah, my beloved, lift that glorious head
And look upon me! put away the thought
Of time and death, and let all things be nought
But this love of to-day! and think of me
As if for ever I should seem to thee
As I am now—I will not go away,
Nor sow my love, to reap some coming day
I know not what: be merry, we shall live
To see our love high o'er all danger thrive."

For now she wept, but, starting midst her tears,
She stopped and listened like a bird that hears
A danger on the wind: the round tower's shade
A lesser patch upon the daisies made,
And all about the place 'gan folk to stir:
She turned and girt her loosened gown to her,
And with one sob, and a long faithful look,
The gathering tears from out her eyes she shook,
Nor bade farewell, but swiftly gat her gone.

But he beneath the tower so left alone
Stooped down and kissed her foot-prints in the grass,
And then with swift steps through the place did pass,
Thinking high things; nor knew he till that hour
How sweet life was, or love its fruit and flower.

So passed the days, nor often might it be
That such sweet hours as this the twain might see;
And they must watch that folk might not surprise
Their hearts' love through the windows of their eyes
When midst of folk they met: but glorious days
Were for Bellerophon, and love and praise
From all folk, though the great end lingered yet
When he sweet life, or glorious death, should get.

Now on a day was held of most and least
Unto Diana sacrifice and feast,
And on that tide the market empty was,
And through the haven might no dromund pass;
And then the wont was they should bear about
The goddess wrought in gold, with song and shout
And winding of great horns, amidst a band
Of bare-kneed maidens, bended bow in hand
And quiver at the back; and these should take,
As if by force, and for the city's sake,
Three damsels chosen by lot for that same end,
And bind their hands, and with them straightly wend
Unto the temple of Diana; there
The priest should lead them to the altar fair
And midst old songs should raise aloft the knife
As if to take from each her well-loved life;
Therewith the King, with a great company,
Through the great door would come and respite cry,
And offer ransom: a great golden horn,
A silver image of a flowering thorn,
Three white harts with their antlers gilt with gold,
A silk gown for a huntress, every fold
Thick wrought with gold and gems; then to and fro
An ancient song was sung, to bid men know
That of such things the goddess had no need;
Yet in the end the maidens all were freed,
The harts slain in their place, the dainty things
Hung o'er the altar from fair silver rings,
And then, midst semblance of festivity
And joyful songs, the solemn day went by.

All this they told Bellerophon, and said,
Moreover, that the white-foot well-girt Maid
These gifts must have, because a merry rout
Of feasters, knowing neither fear nor doubt,
With love and riot did her grove defile
In the old days; and therefore nought more vile
Than three fair maids' lives would she have at first,
And with that burden was the city cursed
For many years; "But in these latter days,
She to whom we to-morrow give great praise,
Will take these signs of our humility,
And let the folk in other wise go free."

So on the morn joyful the city was,
Nor did men look for aught to come to pass
More than in other years; but lo, a change!
For there betid great portents dire and strange.
For first, when in the car of cedar-wood,
Decked with green boughs, the golden goddess stood,
And the white oxen strained at yoke and trace,
In no wise might they move her from the place,
Though they had drawn well twenty times that weight.
So when the priests had come in all their state
To pray her, and no lighter she would grow,
They said she did it for that folk might know
She fain would have a shrine built o'er the way,
And that all rites should there be wrought that day.
So was it done, and now all things seemed well
A little space, and nought there was to tell
Until the King had brought the ransom due,
And the loosed bonds men from the maidens drew;
Then fell the third maid down before the King,
And cried from foaming mouth a shameful thing
Unmeet for maids; then from the frightened folk
That filled the street a clamour there outbroke,
And some cried out to slay the woman there,
And some to burn her wanton body fair,
And some to cast her forth into the sea
And purge the town of that iniquity.
But when the King had bidden lead her forth,
And try if she indeed were one of worth,
Or if her maidenhood were nought and vain,
The tossing street grew somewhat stilled again,
And o'er the sinking tumult called a priest:
"Abide, let see if she will take the beast
E'en as her wont is! but if so it be
That of our old crime she hath memory
And threatens us with something strange and new,
Yet mid your fear do all in order due,
Nor make two faults of one, lest ye should bear
A double punishment from year to year."

Then were the harts brought forth; the first one stood
Fearless as he were lonely in the wood,
While to his throat drew nigh the sharp-edged knife,
Nor did the second strive to keep his life;
But when the third and biggest drew anigh,
He tossed his gilded antlers angrily
And smote his foot against the marble floor,
While from his throat came forth a low hoarse roar;
And as the girl whose office was to smite
His drawn-back throat came forth confused and white,
And raised a wavering hand aloft, then he
His branching horns from the priests' hands shook free,
And as the affrighted girl fell back, turned round,
And gathered up his limbs for one last bound;
But even therewith a soldier from the band
That stood about the King raised up his hand,
And in the beast's heart thrust his well-steeled spear,
And as he smote, like one who knew no fear,
He cried aloud:
"O foolish Artemis,
Men's ways thou knowest not, putting from thee this,
The gift once offered! think no more of us
That we will pray with eyes all piteous
Before thee, or give gifts from trembling hands;
But get thee gone straightway to other lands,
Where folk will yet abide thee—for we know
How long a way it is for thee to go
From heaven to earth, how far thine arms will reach,
And no more now thy good-will do beseech!"

He stooped, and from the beast his weapon drew,
Then turned and passed his fear-struck fellows through,
Or ere the swords from out the scabbards came;
And so folk say, that no man knew his name
Or whence he was.
But from the concourse broke
In pale and murmuring knots the frightened folk;
And if the priests had heart yet for a word
Of comfort, neither so had they been heard;
But they slunk off too, more perchance afraid
Because they were the nigher to the Maid.

Now had the morn begun with cloud and sun;
But, little heeded there of any one
Mid that beginning of fear's agony,
Slowly the clouds were swallowing up the sky;
So ere the sun had wholly sunk in them,
Great drops fell slowly from a black cloud's hem
Amid that troubled folk, who felt as though
They from that place of terror needs must go,
Yet, going, scarce could feel their unnerved feet;
Then gleamed a lightning-flash adown the street,
The clattering thunder, made ten times more loud,
Because of dread, hushed all the murmuring crowd,
And brought a many trembling to their knees,
And some set off a-running towards the quays,
That they might go they knew not where or why;
But therewithal such rain fell from the sky,
As though some river of the upper world
Had burst his banks; the furious south-wind hurled
The folk's wet raiment upward as it tore
Along the ground, and the white rain-spray bore
Seaward along: yet so it came to pass
That no more terror from the sky there was;
The wind grew steady, but from roof of grey
Fast fell the rain upon the ruined day,

Till trembling still, and shivering with the cold,
Home went all folk, and soon the Maid of gold
Stood lonely in the rain-beat way and drear,
Amid drenched cloths and garlands, once made fair
To make the day more joyous.—You had thought
That now already had the Maiden brought
Upon the city all the dreaded ill,
So lifeless was it grown and lone and still.

But now to tell of Prince Bellerophon;
Upon that day so chanced it he had gone
Unto the hills, in chase the hours to spend
Until the tide of feasting should have end;
For since he was an alien in that place,
Beside the King he might not show his face
Unto the goddess; so that morn he stood
Upon a hill top that from out a wood
Rose bare; thence looking east, he saw the sky
Grow black and blacker as the rain drew nigh,
And deemed it good to go, but, as he turned,
Afar a jagged streak of lightning burned,
Paling the sunshine that the dark woods lit,
And rocks about him; through his mind did flit
Something like fear thereat; and still he gazed
Out to the east, but not again there blazed
That fire from out the sky. Now was he come
To such a place, that thence fair field, and home
Of toiling men, and wood, and broad bright stream
Lay down below, and many a thing did gleam
Beneath the zenith's brightness, brighter yet
For horror of the far clouds' stormful threat;
And clear the air was with the coming rain—
So then as he would turn his head again,
Out in the far horizon like a spark
Some flame broke out against the storm-clouds dark,
And seemed to grow beneath his eyes; he stood,
And, gazing, saw across the day's dark mood
Another and another, nigh the first;
Then, as the distant thunder's threatening cursed
The country-side, and trembling beast and man,
The spark-like three flames into one thread ran,
That shot aloft amidst, yet further spread
At either end; and to himself he said:
"Ah, is it so? what tidings then draw near?
In warlike lands soon should I look to hear
Of armies marching on through war and wrack;
Good will it be in haste to get me back
Unto the foolish folk that trust in me."

Then did he mount and ride off hastily
Adown the slopes; but not so fast withal
But that upon him did the full storm fall
In no long time; and so through pelting rain
And howling wind he reached the gate again;
And so unto the palace went, to hear
From pale lips tales of all that day of fear;
And when about those bale-fires seen afar
He spake, and bade make ready for some war,
Folk listened coldly; for they thought to see
Some strange, portentous sign of misery
Set in the heavens upon the morrow morn,
And the old tale of war seemed well outworn.

Yet ere the night beyond its midst was worn,
Another tale unto their ears was borne
That cast into their hearts the ancient fear,
And the Gods' threatening easier seemed to bear
Than this that fell on them.
At dead of night
The grey clouds drew apart, the moon shone bright
Over a dripping world; and some folk slept
Wearied by fear, if some their tired limbs kept
Ready for flight; then clattering horse-hooves came
To the east gate, and one called out the name
Of him who had the guard; so said the man
That forth he went into the moonlight wan,
And saw nought but the tall black-shadowed trees
Waving their dripping boughs in the light breeze,
So went back scared. But in a while again
The galloping of horse did he hear plain,
But he and his sat fast and spake no word,
And scarce for fear might they hold spear or sword.
Nigher the sound came, till it reached the gate;
Then as the warders did abide their fate,
Thinking to see the gates burst open wide,
And death in some strange shape betwixt them ride,
The gates were smitten on with hasty blows,
And breathless cries of wild entreaty rose
Up through the night:
"Open, O open, ye
Who sit in peace, and let in misery!
Do ye not see the red sky at our backs?
And how the earth all quiet places lacks,
And shakes beneath the myriad hooves of steel?
Open, ah open, as ye hope for weal!
For ships lie at your quays with sails all bent
And oars made ready—Open, we are spent!
Do ye not hear them? Open, Lycian men!"

With staring eyes still sat the warders when
That cry they heard, and knew not what should be;
And the great gates of oak, clenched mightily
With iron end-long and athwart, seemed fair
Unto their eyes; but as they cowered there
A clash of steel again their dull ears heard
That came from out the town, and more afeard
They grew, if it might be; then torches came
Into the place of guard, and mid their flame
A shining one in arms, with wrathful eyes
'Neath his bright helm, who cried:

"Why in this guise
Sit ye, O Lycians? Get each to his home!
For know that yesterday three keels did come
Laden with spindles and all women's gear,
And none need lack e'en such a garment here
As well befits him—lutes the Gods have sent,
And combs and golden pins, to that intent
That ye may all be merry—what say I?
Ye may be turned to women verily,
Because the Gods are wise, and thriftless deed
Mislikes them, and forsooth is little need
That thews and muscles go with suchlike hearts
As ye have, while all wise and manly parts
Are played by girls, weak-handed, soft, and white.

"Get to the tower-top, look ye through the night,
And ye shall see the cleared sky made all red
And murky 'neath the moon with signs of dread;
Come forth and meet them! What! the Gods ye fear,
And what they threaten? Life to you is dear?
Ah, fools, that think not how to all on earth
The very death is born along with birth;
That some men are but dying twenty years,
That some men on this sick-bed of all tears
Must lie for forty years, for eighty some,
Or ever they may reach their peaceful home!
Ah, give to birth the name of death, and wait
With brave hearts rather for the stroke of fate,
And hope, since ye gained death when ye were born,
That ye from death by dying may be torn—
—Unless ye deem that if this day ye live,
The next a deathless life to you shall give.

"Come, then! these few behind me may ye see
Who think it worse to live on wretchedly
Than cast the die amidst of noble strife
For honoured death or fearless glorious life—
—Yea, yea! and is the foe upon us then?"

For even as he spake they heard again
The smiting on the door, and as the sword
Leapt from the exile's sheath with his last word,
Again the cry, made dim by the thick door,
Smote on their ears:
"Lycians, are ye no more
Within your guarded town? A voice we heard
As if of one who bade us not be feared—
He was a god belike, and no more men
Dwell in your town: ah, will ye open then?
Do ye not hear that noise upon the wind,
And do ye think that ye fair days shall find
If our red blood shall stain your ancient gate?"

Then, as if these were maddened by some fate,
Down rained the blows upon the unyielding oak,
And the scared guards shrank back behind the folk
Bellerophon brought with him; therewith he
Sheathed his bright blade, and shot back mightily
The weight of iron bolt, and therewithal
Stepped aside swiftly; back the gates did fall
Upon their hinges, and a wretched throng
Stood, horse and foot, the glimmering spears among,
Cowering and breathless, and with eyes that turned
Over their shoulders, as though still they yearned
To see no more the quiet moonlit way
Beyond the open gates. But now, when they
Were ordered somewhat, and the gates again
Shut fast, Bellerophon cried out:
"O men,
Full fast ye fled, meseems! and who were these,
That made you tremble at the wet-leaved trees
And quivering acres of the bearded rye?"

Then spake an old man: "Fair sir, manfully
Thou speakest, and thy words are full of hope;
And yet with these no power thou hast to cope,
Who for each rye-head raise a spear aloft
Who know as much of fear, or pity soft,
As do the elm-trees; whom the Gods drive on
Until the world once happy they have won
And made it desert, peopled by the ghosts
Of those who happy died before their hosts;
Or else lived on in fear and misery
A little while before God let them die—
Devils are these; but what scorn shall we get
When thou hast heard tha these are women!—yet
Keep thou thy scorn till thou art face to face
With these a minute ere the fearful chase."

Loud laughed Bellerophon, and said, "See ye,
O tremblers, what foreknowledge was in me,
When I said e'en now ye should change your parts
With women! Throw the gates wide, fearful hearts,
And let us out, that with a word or two
All that is needed herein we may do:"

The old man said, "Laugh, then, while yet your eyes
Are still unblasted with the miseries
These days have brought on us!—Lo, if I tell
Half of the dreadful things that there befell,
Ye will not listen,—if I tell the shape
Of these fell monsters, for whom hell doth gape
Still will ye say that but my fear it is,
That speaketh in me,—yea, but hearken this
For certainly such foes are on you now
As, bound together by a dreadful vow,
Will slay yourselves, and wives, and little ones,
And build them temples with the sun-bleached bones,
Unto the nameless One who gives them force."

Then cried Bellerophon, in wrath: "To horse!
To horse, O Lycians! Ere the moon is down

The dawn shall come to light us; in the town
Bide thou, O captain, and guard gate and wall,
And leave us to what hap from Fate may fall!
We are enow—and for these cowards here,
Let them have yet another death to fear
Unless they rule their tongues. Tell thou the King
That, when I come again, full many a thing
These lips will have to tell him; and meanwhile,
Since often will the Gods make strong the vile,
And bring adown the great, let him have care
That this his city is left nowise bare
Of men, and food, and arms. More might I say,
But now methinks the night's face looks toward day,
The moon sinks fast; so get we speedily
Unto that redness in the eastern sky,
That at the dawn with smoke shall dim the sun."

A shout rose when his last clear word was done,
And at his back went rolling down the way
Mingled with clash of arms, for, sooth to say,
Hard had he laboured ere the dark night fell,
And thus had gathered men who loved him well,
Stout hearts to whom more fair it seemed to be
The face of death in stricken field to see
Than in that place to bide, till Artemis
Had utterly consumed all hope of bliss
With some unknown, unheard-of shape of fear.

So now his well-shod steed they brought him there;
Once more from out its sheath he drew his sword,
The gates swung backward at his shouted word,
And forth with eager eyes into the waves
Of darkness did he ride; the spears and glaives
Moved like a tossing winter grove behind
As on he led them, fame or death to find;
And grey night made the world seem over wide,
And over empty, in the darkling tide,
Betwixt the moonset and the dawn of day.

Then rose the sun; the fear that last night lay
Upon that people changed to certain fear
Well understood, of death that drew anear;
And now no more the timorous kept their eyes
Turned unto earth, lest in the sky should rise
The dreadful tokens of a changing world;
No more they thought to see strange things down-hurled
By Gods as unlike their vain images
As unto men are hell's flame-branchéd trees.
Last night for any war or pestilence,
Glad had they been to change that crushing sense
Of helplessness and lies; but now this morn,
Tormented by the rumour newly born,
The vague fear seemed the lightest; the Gods' hands
Less cruel than the deeds of those fell bands.—
Uprooted vines, fields trampled into mire,
The ring of spears around the stead afire,
Steel or the flame for choice; the torture-hour
When time is gone, and the flesh hath no power
But to give agony on agony
Unto the soul that will not let it die,
So strong it is—the lone despair; the shame
Of a lost country and dishonoured name;
These last but little things to bear indeed,
When e'en the greatest helps not in our need,
And o'er the earth is risen furious hell.

Now, when this terror on the city fell,
At first went thronging to the clamorous quays
Rich men, with whatso things their palaces
Could give, that strong-backed slaves of theirs might bear.
And to and fro the great lords wandered there,
Making hard bargains 'neath the shipmen's grin,
Who had good will a life of ease to win
With one last voyage; here and there indeed,
Among the heaps of silver and rich weed
Piled on the deck, the hard-hand mariners
Thrust rudely 'gainst the wondering infant heirs,
And delicate white slaves, and proud-eyed wives,
And grumbled as they wrought to save their lives.
And here and there a ship was moving out
With white sails spreading amid oath and shout,
While her sweeps smote the water heavily,
And on the prow stood, yearning for the sea
And other lands beyond, some trembling lord.
But presently thereof the King had word;
And when he knew that thus the matter went,
A trusty captain to the quays he sent,
And stout men armed, who lined the water-side.
So there perforce must every man abide,
For shut and guarded now was every gate.

But if, amid the fear of coming fate,
You ask how fared the sweet Philonoë,
With mind a shrinking tortured thing to see,
How shall you wonder! Tales of dread she heard
With scornful eyes, and chid with eager word
Her timorous women; and with bright flushed face
And glittering eyes, she went from place to place,
As though foreknowledge of the joy to come
Pierced through all grief. Of those that saw her, some
Would say, "Alas! this ill day makes her mad."
And some, "A message certes hath she had
From the other world, and is foredoomed to die."
But some would gaze upon her wrathfully,
While sitting with bent head on woe intent,
They watched her fluttering raiment as she went
Her daily ways as in fair time of peace.

So did the longest of all days decrease
Through hours of straining fear; full were the ways
With homeless country folk, with 'wildered gaze
Fixed on the eager townsmen questioning;
And carts with this or that poor homely thing,
And cumbered women worn and desolate,
Blocked up the road anigh the eastern gate.
Thronged with pale faces were the walls that day
Of folk so scared they could not go away,
But still must watch until the horror came,
Or watch at least that smoke above the flame
Till sundown lit the sky with dreadful light:
And still the tales of horror and affright
Grew greater, and the cumbered city still
Weighed down with wealth could summon up no will
To fight or flee, or with closed lips to wait
Amidst her gold the evil day of fate.
Night came at last, a night of all unrest:
Upon the armed men now the people pressed
At gate and quay, until they needs must yield,
And many a bark o'erladen slowly reeled
Beneath the moonlight o'er the harbour green;
While as the breathing of the night wind keen
Sang down the creek, great sounds of fear it bore,
And redder was the sky than heretofore.

A fearful night, when some at last must think
That they of no more horror now might drink
Than they had drank; wherefore, with stress of fear
Made brave, some men must catch up shield and spear,
And leaderless go forth unto the flame
All eyes were turned to; but when daylight came,
With its grey light came naked death again,
And honourless did all things seem and vain
That man might do; the gates were left ajar,
And through the streets helpless in weed of war
The warders went: nought worth the King was made,
When by each man the truth of all was weighed,
And all seemed wanting: help there was in none.

Yet when 'mid these things nigh the day was done,
And the foe came not, once more hope was born
Within men's hearts too wearied and outworn
To gather fresh fear; then the walls seemed good,
The great gates more than iron and oaken wood,
And with returning hope there came back shame,
And they, bethinking them of their old name,
'Gan deem that spear to spear was no ill play,
What wrath of goddesses soever lay
Upon the city; and withal indeed,
There came fresh rumours to their honour's need,
And they bethought them of the godlike one
Who in their midst so great a deed had done,
And who erewhile rode forth so carelessly
Their very terror with his eyes to see.
So at the sunset into ordered bands
Once more the men were gathered; women's hands
Bore stones up to the ramparts that no more
That crowd of pale and anxious faces bore,
But helms and spear-heads; and the King came forth
Amidst his lords, and now of greater worth
Than common folk he seemed once more to be.
And in some order, if still timorously,
The Lycians waited through the night; the sky
Showed lesser tokens of the foe anigh,
So still hope grew.
At dawn of day the King
Bade folk unto Diana's image bring
Things precious and burnt-offerings; and the smoke
Curled o'er the bowed heads of the praying folk
There in the streets, and though nought came to pass
To tell that well appeased the goddess was,
And though they durst not strive to move her thence,
Yet did there fall on men a growing sense
That now the worst was over: and at noon,
Just as the King amid the trumpets' tune
Went to his house, a messenger pierced through
The wondering crowd, and toward Jobates drew,
Nor did him reverence, nor spake aught before
He gave unto the King the scroll he bore.
Then from his saddle heavily down-leapt,
Stiffened, as one who not for long has slept,
While the King read the scroll; then those anigh
Amid the expectant silence heard him cry,
"Praise to the Gods, who are not angry long!
Hearken, all ye, how they have quenched our wrong."

Good health and good-hap to the Lycian King
And all his folk, and every wished-for thing
Wisheth hereby Bellerophon, and saith:
From out the valley of the shade of death
Late am I come again to make you glad,
Because no evil journey have we had.
And now the land is cleansed of such a pest
As has not been before; be glad and rest,
And look to see us back in seven days' space,
For yet awhile must we abide to chase
The remnant of the women that ye feared.

Silence a moment followed that last word,
Then such a joyous shout, as good it is
That those can know not who still dwell in bliss;
Then turning here and there, with varied noise
The people through all places did rejoice,
Till pleasure failed for weariness; but still

Did old and young, and men and women fill
The temples with their praises; till, when earth
Had fallen into twilight mid their mirth,
With prayers and hymns they brought the great-eyed, white,
Slow-going oxen through the gathering night,
And yoked them to Diana's car again;
Nor this time were they yoked thereto in vain,
Down went the horned heads, beam and axle-tree
Creaked as they drew, and folk cried out to see
The wheels go round; heart opened unto heart
With unhoped joy, and hate was set apart,
Envy and malice waited for some day
More common, as the goddess took her way
Amid the torch-lit, flower-strewn, joyous street,
Unto the house made ready for her feet.

But mid the noise of great festivity
That filled the night, slept on Philonoë,
Amid that sea of love past hope and fear,
And woke at sunrise no more sound to hear
Than singing of the birds in thick-leaved trees
Ere yet the sun might silence them; like these
Did she rejoice, nor strange to her it was
That all these things her love should bring to pass.
Rising, she said, "To-day thou workest this,
And unto many givest life and bliss;
To-morrow comes: therewith perchance for me
A time when thou my faithful heart mayst see."
Then she alone her fair attire did on,
And mid the sleepers went her way alone
Into the garden, and from flower to flower
Passed, making sweeter even that sweet hour;
And as by soft folds of her fluttering gown
Her body's fairness was both hid and shown,
E'en so in simpleness her soul indeed
Lay, not drawn back, but veiled beneath the weed
Of earthly beauty that the Gods had lent
Till they through years should work out their intent.

O'er the freed city passed the time away,
Until it drew unto the promised day
Of their return who all that peace had won.
And now the loved name of Bellerophon
Rang ever in the maiden's ears; and she,
As in the middle of a dream, did see
The city made all ready for that hour,
When in a fair-hung townward-looking bower,
Pale now, amidst her maids she should be set,
New pain of longing for her heart to get.

Some dream there was of hurrying messengers
Bright with a glory that was nowise theirs,
And strains of music bearing back again
The heart to vague years long since lived in vain;
Then still a moving dream—of robes of gold,
Armour unsullied by the bloody mold
That bought this peace; a dream of noble maid
And longing youth in snowy robes arrayed;
Of tinkling harps and twinkling jewelled hands,
And gold-shod feet to meet the war-worn bands,
That few and weary, flower-crowned, made the dream
Less real amid the dainty people seem—
A wild dream of strange weapons heaped on wains,
And rude wrought raiment vile with rents and stains,
And dream-like figures by the axle-trees—
—Women or beasts? and in the hands of these
Trumpets of wood, and conch-shells, and withal
Clamour of blast and horrid rallying call,
And such a storm of strange discordant cries,
As stilled the townsfolk mid their braveries,
For therewith came the prisoners of the fight.

A dreadful dream!—with blood-stained hair and white,
Clad in most strange habiliment of war,
Sat an old woman on a brazen car;
White stared her eyes from a brown puckered face
Upon the longed-for dainties of that place,
But wrath and fear no more in them were left,
For death seemed creeping on her; an axe-heft
Her chained hands held yet; and a monstrous crown,
Of heavy gold, 'twixt her thin feet and brown
Was laid as she had cast it off in fight,
When she was fain amidst her hurried flight
To hide all signs of her fell royalty.
An unreal dream—about her seemed to be,
Figures of women, clad in warlike guise,
In scales of brass, beasts' skins, and cloths of dyes
Uncouth and coarse, made vile with earth and blood.
A dream of horror! nought that men deem good
Was seen in them, were they or young or old:
Great-limbed were some and mighty to behold,
With long black hair and beast-like brows, and low
Bald-headed, old, and wizened did some go,
Yet all adorned with gold; this, in rich gown
Of some slain woman, went with eyes cast down;
That yelling walked, with armour scantly clad,
And at her belt a Lycian's head yet had
Hung by the flaxen hair; this old and bent
From bushy eyebrows grey, strange glances sent,
Grinning as from their limbs the people shrank;
But most the cup of pain and terror drank,
That they had given to drink so oft ere now
If any sign thereof their eyes might show;
And whatso mercy they of men might have,
No hope for them their gross hearts now did save.

A dreadful dream! Philonoë's slim hands
Shut from her eyes the sight of those strange bands

Yet dreamlike must her heart behold them still,
Amid new thoughts of God, and good and ill,
And her eyes filled with tears. But what was this
That smote her yearning heart with sudden bliss,
Yet left it yearning? her fair head she raised,
And with wide eyes down on the street she gazed,
Yet cried not out; though all cry had been drowned
Amid those joyous shouts, as, laurel-crowned,
And sword in hand, and in his battered gear
On his black horse he came, and raised to her
Eyes that her heart knew. Nay, she moved not aught,
Nor reached her arms abroad, as he was brought
Beneath her place, too soon to go away;
And open still her hands before her lay
As down the street passed on the joyous cries,
Nor were there any tears in her soft eyes;
Only her lips moved softly, as she cast
One look upon the people going past,
Struggling and slow behind the last bright spears,
Whose steady points had so thrust back their fears.

But amid silence 'neath the eyes of men,
Another time that day they met again;
And that was at the feast in the great hall,
For thither must the King's folk, one and all,
Women as men, give welcome unto him
Through whom they throve. Belike all things grew dim
Before the hero's eyes but her alone,
Belike a strange light in the maid's eyes shone,
Made bright with pain; but yet hand met not hand,
Though each to each so close the twain must stand,
And though the hall was hushed to hear her say
Words that she heeded not of that fair day.
But when her clear and tender speech had end,
And mouths of men a mighty shout did send
Betwixt the pillars, still her lips did move,
As though they two were lone, with words of love
Unheard, but felt by him.
So passed the day,
And other days and nights fell fast away;
But now when this great trouble had gone by,
And things again seemed no more now to lie
Within his mighty hands, she 'gan to fear
Her father's wiles again; the days grew drear,
The nights too long, nor might she see his face,
Nor might they speak in any lonely place;
And hope at whiles waxed dim, and whiles she saw
The fate her heart so dreaded on them draw,
While she must sit aside with folded hands,
While for her sake he shunned the peaceful lands:
And all the while there must at last be borne
That darkest hour that brings about the morn.

Now as the days passed, to his treasury
Would the King go, King Prœtus' gift to see,
And stand with knitted brows to gaze on it,
While many thoughts about his heart would flit.
And on a day he said, "Time yet there is
To slay the man who saved our life and bliss.
Once did I cast him unto death, and he
Must win nought thence but utter victory;
And when the Gods helped me with ruin and fear
Another time, yet that brought nowise near
The end this binds me to; yet once again
Shall it be tried before I call it vain,
And strive no more, but bear the punishment
That on oath-breakers and weak fools is sent."

Then gat he to the doom-hall of the town,
And midst his lords and wise men sat him down
And judged the people; if at whiles to him
The clamour of the jarring folk waxed dim
Amid the thoughts of his own life that rose
Within him, and about his heart did close,
Yet none the less a great King there he seemed;
As of a god's his heart the people deemed.

Now in good peace and joy the summer wore,
Nor did folk mind how it was told of yore
That in the days to come great dangers three,
Within the bounds of Lycia should there be;
For fear of ill was grown an empty name.
Into fair autumn slipped the summer's flame
More fruitful than its wont, and barn and garth
Ran over with the good things of the earth.
Crowded the quays were, but no merchandise,
No bale of fair-wrought cloth or odorous spice,
Bore pestilence within it at that tide;
In peace and health the folk dwelt far and wide.

But when the way's dust easier now was seen
Upon the bordering grape-bunches, whose green
Was passing slow through red to heavy black,
And the ploughed land all standing crop did lack,
Though yet the share the fallow troubled not;
Now, when the nights were cool, and noons still hot,
And in the windless woods the acorn fell,
More tidings were there of that land to tell.

For on a day as in the doom-hall sat
Jobates, and gave word on this and that,
A clamour by the outer door he heard
Of new-come folk, mixed with the answering word
Of those his guards, who at the door did stand;
So when his say was said, he gave command
To bring in one of those about the door;
Then was a country carle brought forth before
The ivory seat, and scared he seemed to be;
And sodden was his face for misery,
As on the King he stared with open eyes.

"What wilt thou?" said Jobates, "What thing lies
Upon thee that my power can take away?
For in mine house the Gods are good to-day."

Twice did the man's lips open as to speak,
But no sound came; the third time did outbreak
A husky, trembling sound from them, but nought
To tell the wondering folk what thing he sought.
Then said the King, "The man is mazed with fear;
Go ye and bring him wine; we needs must hear
What new thing now has happed beneath the sun.
Take heart! for thou art safe!"

So was it done:
The man raised up the bowl with trembling hand,
And drank, and then a while he yet did stand
Silent amid the silence; then began
In a weak voice:

"A poor and toiling man
I am indeed; therefore a little thing,
My woe may seem to thee; yet note, O King,
That the world changes; unimagined ill
Is born therein, and shall grow greater still.
"In early summer I was well enow
Among such men as still have need to sow
Before they reap, to reap before they eat,
Nor did I think too much of any threat
Time had for me; but therewith came the tide
When those fell women harried far and wide;
I saved myself, my wife, and little ones,
And with nought else lay on this city's stones
Until peace came; then went I to the west
Where dwelt my brother in good peace and rest,
And there the four of us must eat our bread
From hands that grudged not mayhap, with small dread
And plenteous toil. A vineyard hath he there,
Whose blossoming in March was full and fair,
And May's frost touched it not, and July's hail
Against its bunches green might not prevail;
Up a fair hill it stretched; exceeding good
Its sunny south-turned slopes are; a thin wood
Of oak-trees crowns the hill indeed, wherein
Do harbour beasts most fain a feast to win
At hands of us and Bacchus; but a wall
Well built of stones guardeth the garth from all
On three sides, and at bottom of the hill
A full stream runs, that dealeth with a mill,
My brother's too, whose floury duskiness
Our hungry souls with many a hope did bless;
Within the mill-head there the perch feed fat,
And on the other side are meadows flat,
And fruitful; shorn now, and the rooting swine
Beneath the hedge-row oak-trees grunt and whine,
And close within the long grass lies the quail,
While circling overhead the kite doth sail,
And long the partridge hath forgot the mowers.
A close of pot-herbs and of garland flowers
Goes up the hill-side from the green-banked stream,
And a house built of clay and oaken beam
Stands at its upper end, whose hillward side
Is midst the vines, that half its beams do hide.—
—Nay, King, I wander not, I mind me well
The tale from end to end I have to tell,
Have patience!

"Fair that house was yesterday,
When lusty youth and slim light-handed may
Were gathered from the hamlets thereabout;
From the stream-side came laughing scream and shout,
As up the bank the nets our maidens drew,
And o'er their bare feet washed with morning dew
Floundered the cold fish; for grape-gathering tide
It was that morn, and folk from far and wide
Came to our help, and we must feast them there,
And give them all we had of good and fair.
"King, do I babble? thou for all thy crown
And robes of gold hadst gladly sat thee down
At the long table 'neath the apple-trees—
And now—go find the bones of one of these,
And be called wise henceforth!

"The last guest came,
The last shout died away that hailed his name,
The ring of men about the homestead door
Began to move; the damsels hung no more
Over the fish-tubs, but their arms shook dry
And shod their feet, and came up daintily
To mingle with the girls new-come thereto,
And take their baskets and the edge-tools due;
The good-wife from the white well-scalded press
Brushed off the last wasp; while her mate did bless
The Gods, and Bacchus chiefly, as he poured
Upon the threshold ancient wine long stored
Under the earth; and then broke forth the song
As to the vineyard gate we moved along.
"Hearken, O King! call me not mad, or say
Some evil god-sent dream upon me lay;
Else could I tell thee thus how all things fell?—
Nay speak not, or the end I may not tell.
"Yea, am I safe here? will he hear of it
And come to fetch me, even if I sit
Deep underground, deep underneath the sea,
In places thou hast built for misery
Of those that hate thee; yet for safeguard now
Of me perchance? O King, abide not thou
Until my tale is done, but bid them go
Strengthen thy strong gates—deem thy high walls low
While yet the sun they hide not!"

At that word
He turned and listened as a man who heard
A doubtful noise afar, but still the King
Sat quiet midst his fear of some great thing,
And spake not, lest he yet should lose the tale.

Then said the man: "How much may now avail
Thy power and walls I know not, for I thought
Upon the wind a certain noise was brought—
But now I hear it not, and I will speak—
What said I?—From all mouths there did outbreak
A plaintive song made in the olden time,
Long sung by men of the wine-bearing clime;
Not long it was, and ere the end was o'er
In midst the laden vine-rows did we pour,
And fell to work as glad as if we played;
And merrier grew the laugh of man and maid
As the thin baskets filled upon that morn;
And how should fear or thought of death be born
In such a concourse! Now mid all this, I
Unto the upper end had drawn anigh,
And somewhat lonely was I, when I heard
A noise that seemed the cry of such a bird
As is a corncrake; well, I listened not,
But worked away whereas was set my lot,
Midst many thoughts; yet louder 'gan to grow
That noise, and not so like a bird seemed now
As a great spring of steel loosed suddenly.
I put my basket down, and turned to see
The other folk, nor did they heed the noise,
And still amid their labour did rejoice;
But louder still it seemed, as there I stood
Trembling a while, then turned, and saw the wood
Like and unlike what I had know it erst;
And as I gazed the whole sky grew accurst
As with a greenish vapour, and I turned
Wild eyes adown the hill to see what burned;
There did my fellows 'twixt the vine-rows pass
Still singing; smitten then I thought I was
By sudden sickness or strange coming death;
But even therewith in drawing of a breath
A dreadful shriek rose from them, and mine eyes
Saw such a shape above the wall arise
As drave all manhood from me, and I fell
Grovelling adown; nor have I words to tell
What thing it was I saw; only I know
That from my feet the firm earth seemed to go,
And like a dream showed that fair country-side,
And, grown a mockery, needs must still abide,
An unchanged picture 'gainst the life of fear
So fallen upon me. The sweet autumn air
With a faint sickening vapour now was filled,
And all sounds else but that sound were clean stilled,
Yea, even the voice of folk by death afeard,
That in the void that horror might be heard,
And nought be heeded else.

"Hearken, O King,
The while I try to tell thee of the thing
What like it was—well, lionlike, say I?
Yea, as to one who sees the teeth draw nigh
His own neck—like a horror of the wood,
Goatlike, as unto him who in drear mood
Sees monsters of the night bemock his love,
And cannot hide his eyes or turn to move—
Or serpent-like, e'en as to such an one
A serpent is, who floating all alone
In some untroubled sea all void and dim
Beholds the hoary-headed sea-worm swim,
Circling about him, ere he rise to strike—
Nay, rather, say the world hath not its like—
A changer of man's life, a swallowing dread,
A curse made manifest in devil-head.

"Long lay I there, meseems; no thought I had
Either of death, or yet of being made glad
In time to come, for all had turned to pain,
Nor might I think of aught to call a gain—
Right wondrous is the life of man, O King!
So strong to bear so many a fearful thing,
So weak of will—See now, I live, who lay
How long I know not, on that wretched day,
As helpless as a dead man, but for this,
That pain still grew with memory of what bliss
Past life had been to me; until, God wot,
So was I helped, that memory now was not,
And all was blank.

"Well, once more did I wake,
Empty at first, till stirred the sickening ache
Of that great fear; then softly did I rise,
And gazed about the garth with half-dead eyes,
A heart whence everything but fear was gone."

He stopped a while and hung his head adown,
As if remembering somewhat; then he drew
Nigher the King, and said: "This thing is true.
Though thou believe it not—that I was glad
Within the hour that yet my life I had,
Though this I saw—the garth made waste and bare,
Burnt as with fire, and for the homestead fair
The last flames dying o'er an ash-heap grey—
Gone was the mill, the freed stream took its way
In unchecked shallows o'er a sandy bed.
"I knew not if my kin were slain or fled,
Yet was I glad awhile that nought was there
But me alone, till sense and dread 'gan stir
Within my heart; then slowly I began
To move about, and saw no child of man—
Unless maybe those ash-heaps here and there
I durst not go anigh, my fellows were.
Could I but flee away now! down I gat
Unto the stream, yet on the bank I sat
A long while yet, bewildered; till at last
I gathered heart, and through the stream ran fast,
And on and on, and cried, '*Are all men gone?*
Is there none left on earth but I alone,
And have I nought to tell my tale unto?'

"So did I run, until at last I knew
That among men I was, who, full of fear,

Were striving somewhat of the words to hear
My heart spake, but my lips would utter not;
And food and drink from them perchance I got,
Perchance at last I told the story there;
I know not, but I know I felt the air
And seemed to move—they must have brought me then
To thee, O King—but these are not the men,
These round about—there is no more to say.
Meseems I cannot sleep or go away,
Yet am I weary."
Slowly came from him
The last words, and his eyes, all glazed and dim,
Began to close; he tottered, and at last
Sank on the ground, and into deep sleep passed,
Nor might men rouse him; so they bore him thence,
Till death should reach him or returning sense.

So next of those who brought him thereunto
Was question made what of those things they knew;
Who answered e'en as for their fear they might;
For some had seen a fire the late-past night,
And some the morn before a yellow smoke;
And one had heard the cries of burning folk;
And one had seen a man stark naked fly
Adown the stream-side, and as he went by
Saw that he bled, and thought that on his flesh
Were dreadful marks, that were as done afresh
By branding irons. One, too, said he saw
A dreadful serpent by the moonlight draw
His dry folds o'er the summer-parchéd way
Unto a pool that 'neath the hill-side lay.
And men there were who said that they had heard
The sound of lions roaring, and, afeard,
Had watched all-armed, with barred doors, through the night.
Then as men's faces paled with sore affright,
Unto the doom-hall came more folk, and more,
And tales of such-like things they still told o'er,
Of fresh deaths and of burnings, and still nought
They had to tell of what this fear had wrought.

Now ye shall know that Prince Bellerophon
In a swift ship had sailed a while agone
'Gainst a Tyrrhenian water-thief, who then
Wrought great scathe on the peaceful merchantmen
That sought those waters; so the King sent forth
Another captain that he held of worth,
And eighty men with him in company,
Well armed, the truth of all these things to see.

At sunset from the town did they depart,
And none among them seemed to lack good heart,
And wise they were in war; but ere the sun
Through all the hours of the next day had run,
One ancient brave man only of the band
Came back again, no weapon in his hand,
No shield upon his neck—but carrying now
His son's dead body on his saddle-bow,
A lad of eighteen winters, fair and strong;
But when men asked what thing had wrought that wrong,
Nought might he answer, but with bowed-down head
Still sat beside the arméd body dead,
As one who had no memory; but when folk
Searched the youth's body for the deadly stroke,
No wound at all might they find anywhere;
So still the old man sat with hopeless stare,
And though he seemed right hale and sound of limb,
And ate and drank what things were brought to him,
Yet speechless did he live for three more days,
Then to the silent land he went his ways.

Now a great terror on the city fell,
Even as that whereof we had to tell
In the past summer; day by day there came
Folk fleeing to the gates, who thought no shame
To tell how dreams had scared them, or some sign
In earth, or sky, or milk, or bread, or wine,
Or in some beast late given unto a god;
And on the beaten ways once more there trod
The feet of homeless folk; the country-side
Grew waste and bare of men-folk far and wide;
And whatso arméd men the King did send,
But little space upon their way did wend
Ere they turned back in terror; nigher drew
The belt of desolation, yet none knew
What thing of ill it was that wrought this woe,
More than the man who first the tale did show.

Meanwhile men's eyes unto the sea were turned
Watching, until the Sea-hawk's image burned
Upon the prow Bellerophon that bore,
And his folk cast the hawser to the shore,
And long it seemed to them did he delay.
Yet since all things have end, upon a day
The Sea-hawk's great sweeps beat the water green,
And her long pennon down the wind was seen,
As nigh the noontide toward the quays she passed,
With sound of horns and singing; on the mast
Hung the sea-robbers' fair shields, lip to lip,
And high above the clamour of the ship,
Out from the topmast, a great pennoned spear
The terror of the seas aloft did bear,
The head of him who made the chapmen quake.

New hope did that triumphant music wake
Within men's hearts, as now with joyous shout
The bay-crowned shipmen shot the gangway out
Unto the shore, and once more as a god
The wise Bellerophon among them trod,
As to the Father's house he took his way,
The tenth of all the spoil therein to lay.

But when he came into the greatest square
Where was the temple, a great throng was there,
And on the high steps of the doom-hall's door,
A clear-voiced, gold-clad herald stood, before
A row of spears; and now he cried aloud,
Over the raised heads of the listening crowd:

"Hearken, O Lycians! King Jobates saith:
Upon us lies the shadow of a death
I may not deal with; old now am I grown,
And at the best am but one man alone;
But since such men there are, as yet may hope
With this vague unseen death of man to cope,
He whereby such a happy end is wrought
Shall nowise labour utterly for nought
As at my hands; lest to the gods we seem
To hold too fast to wealth; lest all men deem
We are base-born and vile: so know hereby,
That to the man who ends this woe will I
Give my fair daughter named Philonoë,
And this land's rule and wealth to share with me.
And if it be so that he may not take
The maiden, let him give her for my sake
To whom he will; or if that may not be
A noble ransom shall he have of me
And be content.—May the gods save us yet,
And in fair peace these fears may we forget!"

He ended, and the folk about the place,
Seeing the shipmen come, on these did gaze,
And in their eyes were mingled hope and doubt;
But at the last the shadow of a shout
They raised for Prince Bellerophon; and he
Stood at the door one moment silently,
And wondered; for he knew nought of the things
That there had fallen while the robber-kings
He chased o'er ridge and furrow of the sea;
Because folk deemed ill-omened it would be
To tell thereof ere all things due were paid
Unto the Father, and the fair tenth laid
Before his altar. Yet he could not fail
To see that in some wise the folk must ail;
Such haggard eyes, such feverish faces were
About him; yea, the clamour and the cheer
That greeted him were eager with the pain
Of men who needs must hope yet once again
Before they fall into the jaws of death.

So as the herald spake, he held his breath,
His heart beat fast, and in his eyes there burned
The light of coming triumph, as he turned
Unto a street that led from out the place,
And up the steep way saw the changeless grace
Of the King's palace, and the sun thereon,
That calmly o'er its walls of marble shone,
For all the feverish fears of men who die:
One moment thus he stood, and smiled, then high
Lifted his sword, and led the spear-wood through
The temple-door and toward the altar drew.

But when all rites to Jove were duly done,
Unto the King went up Bellerophon,
To tell him of his fare upon the sea;
So in the chamber named of porphyry
He found Jobates pacing to and fro,
As on the day when first he bade him go
And win the Solymi.
"O King," he said,
"All hail to thee! the water-thief is dead,
His keel makes sport for children of the sea."

"And I, Bellerophon, have news for thee,
And see thou to it! The gods love so well
The fair wide world, that fear and death and hell
In this small land will they shut up for aye.
And thou—when thou hadst luck to get away,
Why must thou needs come back here, to abide
In very hell? I say the world is wide,
And thou art young; far better had it been,
When o'er the sea-thief's bulwarks first were seen
Men's wrathful eyes, the war-shout to have stayed;
Then might ye twain, strong in each other's aid,
Have won some fair town and good peace therein:
For here with us stout heart but death shall win."

Now on a table nigh the King's right hand
Bellerophon beheld a casket stand
That well he knew; thereby a letter lay,
Whose face he had not seen before that day,
And as he noted it a half-smile came
Across his face, for a look like to shame
Was in the King's eyes as they met his own.

Cheerly he spake: "O King, I have been thrown
Into thine hands, and with this city fair
Both weal and woe have I good will to share.
Young am I certes, yet have ever heard
That whether men live careless or afeard
Death reaches them; of endless heaven and hell
Strange stories oft have I heard people tell;
Yet knew I no man yet that knows the road
Which leadeth either to the blest abode
Or to the land of pain. Not overmuch
I fear or hope the gates of these to touch—
Unless we twain be such men verily
As on the earth make heaven and hell to be;
And if these countries are upon the earth,
Then death shall end the land of heaven and mirth.
And death shall end the land of hell and pain.
Yea, and say all these tales be not in vain,
Within mine hand do I hold hope—within
This gold-wrought scabbard—such a life to win

As will not let hope fall off utterly,
Until such time is come that I must die
And no more need it. But the time goes fast,
Into mine ears a tale the townsmen cast
With eager words, almost before my feet
The common earth without Jove's fane could meet;
I heard thy herald too say mighty things—
How sayest thou about the oaths of kings?"

The King's eyes glistened: "O Corinthian,"
He said, "if there be such a twice-cursed man
As rules the foolish folk and punisheth,
And yet must breathe out lies with every breath,
Let him be thrice cursed, let the Gods make nought
Of all his prayers when he in need is caught!"

"What sayest thou," then said Bellerophon,
"If a man sweareth first to such an one,
And then to such another, and the twain
Cannot be kept, but one still maketh vain
The other?"
Then the King cast down his eyes:
"What sayest thou, my son? What mysteries
Lie in these words of thine? Go forth and break
This chain of ours, and then return to take
Thy due reward—oft meseems so it is
That these our woes are forged to make thy bliss."

Then laughed Bellerophon aloud, and said,
"The Gods are kind to mortals, by my head!
But so much do they love me certainly
That more than once I shall not have to die;
And I myself do love myself so well
That each night still a pleasant tale shall tell
Of the bright morn to come to me. But thou,
Think of thy first vow and thy second vow!
For so it is that I may come again
Despite of all: and what wilt thou do then?
Ponder meanwhile if from ill deeds can come
Good hap to bless thee and thy kingly home!"

And even with that last word was he gone,
And the King, left bewildered and alone,
Sat down, and strove to think, and said at last:
"Good were it if the next three months were past;
I should be merrier, nigher though I were
Unto that end of all that all men fear."

Then sent he for his captain of the guard,
And said to him, "Now must thou e'en keep ward
Closer than heretofore upon the gates,
Because we know not now what thing awaits
The city, and Bellerophon will go
The truth of all these wondrous things to know:
So let none pass unquestioned; nay, bring here
Whatever man bears tales of woe or fear
Into the city; fain would I know all—
Nay, speak, what thinkest thou is like to fall?"

"Belike," the man said, "he will come again,
And with my ancient master o'er us reign.
E'en as I came in did he pass me by,
And nowise seemed he one about to die."

"Nay," said the King, "thou speak'st but of a man;
Shall he prevail o'er what made corpses wan
Of many a stout war-hardened company?"

"Methinks, O King, that such might even be,"
The captain said; "he is not of our blood;
He goes to meet the beast in other mood
Than has been seen amongst us, nor know I
Whether to name him mere man that shall die,
Or half a god; for death he feareth not,
Yet in his heart desire of life is hot;
Life he scorns not, yet will his laughter rise
At hearkening to our timorous miseries,
And all the self-wrought woes of restless men."

"Ah," said the King, "belike thou lov'st him then?"

"Nay, for I fear him, King," the captain said,
"And easier should I live if he were dead;
Besides, it seems to me our woes began
When down our streets first passed this godlike man,
And all our fears are puppets unto him;
That he may brighter show by our being dim,
The Gods have wrought them, as it seems to me."

"What wouldst thou do then that the man might be
A glorious memory to the Lycian folk,
A god who from their shoulders raised a yoke
Dreadful to bear; then, as he came, so went,
When he had fully wrought out his intent?"

"Nay, King, what say'st thou? Hast thou then forgot
Whereto he goes this eve? Nay, hear'st thou not
His horse-hooves' ring e'en now upon the street?
Look out! look out! thine eyes his eyes shall meet,
And see the sun upon his armour bright!
Yet the gold sunset brings about the night,
And the red dawn is quenched in dull grey rain."

Then swiftly did the King a window gain,
And down below beheld Bellerophon,
And certes round about his head there shone
A glory from the west. Then the King cried:
"O great Corinthian, happy mayst thou ride,
And bring us back our peace!"
The hero turned,
And through his gold hair still the sunset burned,

But half his shaded face was grey. He stayed
His eager horse, and round his mouth there played
A strange smile as he gazed up at the King,
And his bright hauberk tinkled ring by ring.
But as the King shrank back before his gaze,
With his left hand his great sword did he raise
A little way, then back into the sheath
He dropped it clattering, and cried:
"Life or death,
But never death in life for me, O King!"
Therewith he turned once more; with sooty wing
The shrill swifts down the street before him swept,
And from a doorway a tired wanderer leapt
Up to his feet, with wondering look to gaze
Upon that golden hope of better days.

Then back the King turned; silent for awhile
He sat beneath his captain's curious smile,
Thinking o'er all the years gone by in vain.
At last he said:
"Yea, certes, I were fain
If I my life and honour so might save
That he not half alone, but all should have."

"Yea," said the captain, "good the game were then,
For thou shouldst be the least of outcast men;
So talk no more of honour; what say I?—
Thou shouldst be slain in short time certainly,
Who hast been nigh a god before to-day!
Be merry, for much lieth in the way
'Twixt him and life: and, to unsay the word
I said before, be not too much afeard
That he will come again. The Gods belike
Have no great will such things as us to strike,
But will grow weary of afflicting us;
Because with bowed heads, and eyes piteous,
We take their strokes. When thou sitt'st down to hear
A minstrel's tale, with nothing great or dear
Wouldst thou reward him, if he thought it well
Of wretched folk and mean a tale to tell;
But when the godlike man is midst the swords
He cannot 'scape; or when the bitter words,
That chide the Gods who made the world and life,
Fall from the wise man worsted in the strife;
Or when some fairest one whose fervent love
Seems strong the world from out its curse to move,
Sits with cold breast and empty hands before
The hollow dreams that play about death's door—
When these things pierce thine ears, how art thou moved!
Though in such wise thou lov'st not nor art loved;
Though with weak heart thou lettest day wear day
As bough rubs bough; though on thy feeble way
Thou hast no eye to see what things are great,
What things are small, that by the hand of fate
Are laid before thee. Shall we marvel then,
If the Gods, like in other things to men,
(For so we deem them) think no scorn to sit
To see the play, and weep and laugh at it,
And will not have poor hearts and bodies vile
With unmelodious sorrow to beguile
The long long days of heaven—but these, in peace,
Trouble or joy, or waxing, or decrease,
Shall have no heed from them—ah, well am I
To be amongst them! never will I cry
Unto the Gods to set me high aloft;
For earth beneath my feet is sweet and soft,
And, falling, scarce I fall.
"Behold, O King,
Beasts weep not ever, and a short-lived thing
Their fear is, and their generations go
Untold-of past; and I who dwell alow,
Somewhat with them I feel, and deem nought ill
That my few days with more of joy may fill;
Therefore swift rede I take with all things here,
And short, if sharp, is all my woe and fear.
"Now happier were I if Bellerophon,
This god on earth, from out our land were gone,
And well I hope he will not soon return—
Who knows? but if for some cause thou dost yearn
For quiet life without him, such am I
As, risking great things for great things, would try
To deal with him, if back again he comes
To make a new world of our peaceful homes.
Yet, King, it might well be that I should ask
Some earthly joy to pay me for the task;
And if Bellerophon returns again
And lives, with thee he presently will reign,
And soon alone in thy place will he sit;
Yea, even, and if he hath no will for it.
His share I ask then, yet am not so bold
As yet to hope within mine arms to fold
Philonoë thy daughter, any more
Than her, who on the green Sicilian shore
Plucked flowers, and dreamed no whit of such a mate
As holds the keys of life, and death, and fate—
—Though that indeed I may ask, as in time,
The royal bed's air seem no outland clime
To me, whose sire, a rugged mountaineer,
Knew what the winter meant, and pinching cheer."

Into the twinkling crafty eyes of him
The King looked long, until his own waxed dim
For thinking, and unto himself he said:
"To such as fear is trouble ever dead,
How oft soe'er the troublous man we slay?"

At last he spake aloud: "Quick fails the day;
These things are ill to speak of in the night;

Now let me rest, but with to-morrow's light
Come thou to me, and take my word for all."

The mask of reverence he had erst let fall
The Captain brought again across his face,
And smiling left the lone King in his place.
Who when all day had gone, sat hearkening how
Without, his gathering serving-men spake low,
And through the door-chinks saw the tapers gleam.

But now while thus they talked, and yet the stream
Of golden sunsetting lit up the world,
Ere yet the swift her long dusk wings had furled
In the grey cranny, fair Philonoë went
Amid her maids with face to earth down-bent
Across the palace-yard, oppressed with thought
Of what those latter days to her had brought;
Daring, unlike a maid's sweet tranquil mind,
And hushed surprise, so strange a world to find
Within her and around her: life once dear,
Despised yet clung to; fear and scorn of fear;
A pain she might not strive to cast away,
Lest in the heart of it all life's joy lay;
Joy now and ever. Toward the door she came
Of the great hall; the sunset burned like flame
Behind her back, and going ponderingly
She noted her grey shadow slim to see
Rise up and darken the bright marble wall;
Then slower on the grass her feet did fall
Till scarce she moved; then from within she heard
A voice well loved cry out some hurried word.
She raised her face, and in the door she seemed
To see a star new fallen, therefrom there gleamed
Such splendour; but although her dazzled eyes
Saw nought, her heart, fulfilled of glad surprise,
Knew that his face was nigh ere she beheld
The noble brow as wise as grief-taught eld,
Fair as a god's early and unstained youth.

A little while they stood thus, with new ruth
Gathering in either's heart for either's pain,
And fear of days yet to be passed in vain,
And wonder at the death they knew so nigh
And disbelief in parting, should they die,
And joy that still they stood together thus.
Then, in a voice that love made piteous
Through common words and few, she spake and said:

"What dost thou, Prince, with helmet on thine head
And sword girt to thee, this fair autumn eve?
Is it not yet a day too soon to leave
The place thou camest to this very noon?"

He said, "No Lycian man can have too soon
His armour on his back in this our need,
Yea, steel perchance shall come to be meet weed
For such as thou art, lady. Who knows whence
We next may hear tales of this pestilence?
Fair is this house: yet maybe, or to-day
The autumn evening wind has borne away
From its smooth chambers sound of woe and tears,
And shall do yet again. Death slayeth fears,
Now I go seek if Death too slayeth love."

A little toward him did one slim hand move,
Then fell again mid folds of her fair gown;
She spake:

"Farewell; a great man art thou grown;
Thou know'st not fear or lies; so fare thou forth:
If the Gods keep not what is most of worth
Here in the world, its memory bides behind;
And we perchance in other days may find
The end of hollow dreams we once have dreamed,
Waking from which such hopeless anguish seemed."

Pale was her face when these words were begun,
But she flushed red or ere the end was done
With more than sunset. But he spake and said:
"Farewell, farewell, God grant thee hardihead,
And growing pleasure on from day to day!"

Then toward the open gate he took his way
Nor looked aback, nor yet long did she turn
Her eyes on him, though sore her heart did yearn
To have some little earthly bliss of love
Before the end.

But right and left did move
Her damsels as he passed them, e'en as trees
Move one by one when the light fickle breeze
Touches their tops in going toward the sea;
And their eyes turned upon him wonderingly
That such a man could live, such deeds be done;
But now his steed's hooves smote upon the stone,
He swung into his saddle, and once more
Cast round a swift glance at the great hall door
And saw her not; alone she stood within,
Striving to think what hope of things to win
Had left her life; her maidens' prattling speech
Within the porch her wildered ears did reach,
But not the hard hooves' clatter as he rode
Along the white wall of that fair abode,
Nor yet the shout that he cast back again
Unto the King; dark grew each window-pane,
She seemed to think her maids were talking there,
She doubted that some answer came from her;
She knew she moved thence, that a glare of light
Smote on her eyes, that old things came in sight
She knew full well; that on her bed she lay,
And through long hours was waiting for the day;
But knew not what she thought of; life seemed gone,
And she had fought with Gods, and they had won.

NEXT morn, the captain, as it was to be,
Held speech with King Jobates privily.
And when he came from out the royal place
A smile of triumph was there on his face,
As though the game were won; but as he went
Unto the great gate on his luck intent,
A woeful sound there smote upon his ear,
And crossed his happy mood with sudden fear;
For now five women went adown the street,
That e'en the curious townsmen durst not meet,
Though they turned round to look with wild scared eyes,
And listened trembling to those doleful cries;
Because for Pallas' sacred maids they knew
Those wild-eyed wailing ones that closer drew
Scant rags about them, as with feet that bled
And failing limbs they tottered blind with dread,
Past house and hall. Now such-like had been these,
And guarded as the precious images
That hold a city's safety in their hands,
And dainty things from many distant lands
Were gathered round them in the house that stood,
Fair above all, within the hallowed wood,
Ten leagues from out the city; wondrous lore,
Folk deemed, within that house they pondered o'er,
And had been goddesses, but that they too
The hope of death if not its terror knew.

White grew the captain's face these folk to see,
Yet midst his fear he muttered: "Well be ye,
O Gods, who have no care to guard your own!
Perchance ye too weary of good are grown;
Look then on me, I shall not weary you—
I who once longed great things and high to do
If ye would have it so;—come, bless me then,
Since ye are grown aweary of good men!"
So to his folk he turned, and bade them take
The holy women for the goddess' sake,
And give them into some kind matron's care.
So did they, and when bathed and clad they were,
He strove in vain to know their tale; for they
Had clean forgot all things before that day,
And only knew that they by some great curse
Had late been smitten, and mid fear of worse
Were leaving life behind. So when he knew
That with these woeful women he might do
Nought else, because their hearts were dead before
Their bodies, midst the fear and tumult sore
He went unto the gate, and waited there
If he perchance some other news might hear;
But nought befell that day to tell about,
And tidingless night came, and dark died out.

But just before the rising of the sun
The gate was smitten on, and there sat one
On a grey horse, and in bright armour clad.
Young was he, and strong built; his face seemed glad
Amidst of weariness, and though he seemed
Even as one who of past marvels dreamed.
Now turned the captain to him hastily,
And said: "Fair fellow, needs thou must with me,
Nor speak thou good or bad before the King
Has heard thee;" therewith, scarcely wondering,
He rode beside the captain, and the twain
In no long time the palace gate did gain,
Which opened at a word the captain spake,
And past the warders standing half awake
They came unto the King: sleeping he lay,
While o'er his gold bed crept the daylight grey;
But softly thereunto the captain went,
And to his sleeping head his own down bent
And whispered; then as one who has just heard
Right in his ears the whisper of death's word,
He started up with eyes that, open wide,
Still saw not what the strange new light might hide;
Upright he sat, and panting for a while,
Till heeding at the last the captain's smile,
And low and humble words, he smiled and said:
"Well be ye! for I dreamed that I was dead
Before ye came, and waking, thought that I
Was dead indeed, and that such things were nigh
As willingly men name not. What wouldst thou?
What new thing must the Lycians suffer now?"

"King," said the captain, "here I have with me
A man-at-arms who joyful seems to be;
Therefore I deem somewhat has come to pass,
Since for these many days no face here has
Made e'en a show of gladness, or of more
Than thinking good it were if all were o'er,—
The slow tormenting hope—the heavy fear.
Speak thou, good friend! the King is fain to hear
The tale thou hast to tell."
Then spake the man:
"Good hap to me, indeed, that thus I can
Make glad the Lycian folk, and thee, O King!
But nowise have I wrought the happy thing,
But some immortal as meseems:
"Now I
With other two made up my mind to try
The chance of death or glorious life herein,
In good hope either rest from fear to win
Or many days of pleasure; so I armed
In this my father's gear, that had been charmed
Years long agone by spells, well worn I doubt
To nothing now, if one might clean tell out
The truth of all; then in Diana's fane
Anigh our house I met the other twain,
And forth we went at dawn, two days ago.
Not hard it was our rightful road to know,
For hour by hour of dreadful deaths we heard,

And still met fleeing folk, so sore afeard
That they must scowl upon us questioning.
And so at last we deemed the dreadful thing,
What death soever he dealt otherwhere
From time to time, must have his chiefest lair
Within Minerva's consecrated lands,
That stretch from where her mighty temple stands
Midst its wild olive-groves, until they meet
The rugged mountain's bare unwooded feet.
Thither we turned, and at the end of day
We reached the temple, and with no delay
Sought out the priests and told them of our rede.
"They answered us that heavy was their need,
That day by day they dreaded death would come
And take them from the midst of that fair home,
And shortly, that when midnight was passed o'er,
Their lives in that house they would risk no more,
But get them gone. 'All things are done,' said they,
'The sacred maids, who have not seen the day,
But in these precincts, count the minutes now
Until the midnight moon the way shall show;
Ten horse-loads of the precious things we have,
That somewhat of our past lives we may save
To bring us o'er the sea. So sorry cheer,
Fair sons, of meat or lodging get ye here,
For all is bare and blank as some hill-side;
Nor, if ye love your lives, will ye abide
Another minute here: for us, indeed,
One answer more from Pallas do we need;
And, that being got at, nothing stays us then.'

"Worn were the faces of these holy men,
And their eyes wandered even as they spake,
And scarcely did they move as men awake
About that place, whose mighty walls of stone
Seemed waiting for the time when all was gone,
Except the presence of the Dreadful Maid,
Careless of who was glad and who afraid.

"Shortly we answered; we would bide and see
What thing within the precinct there might be
Until the morn, and if we lived till then,
Further afield would seek this death of men.
They heard us wondering, or with scorn, but gave
Such cheer to us as yet they chanced to have;
And we, being weary, fell asleep withal
Within a chamber nigh the northern wall
Of the great temple. Such a dream I had,
As that I thought fair folk, in order glad,
Sang songs throughout a place I knew to be
A town whereof had tales been told to me
When I was but a youngling: years agone
Had I forgot it all, and now alone
The nameless place had come to me.—O King,
I dreamed, I say, I heard much people sing
In happy wise; but even therewithal
Amidst my dream a great voice did there call,
But in a tongue I knew not; and each face
Was changed to utter horror in that place;
And yet the song rose higher, until all tune
Was strangled in it, and to shrill shrieks soon
It changed, and I sat upright in my bed,
Waked in an instant, open-mouthed with dread.
I know not why—though all about I heard
Shrill screams indeed, as though of folk afeard,
Mixed with a roar like white flame that doth break
From out a furnace-mouth: the earth did shake
Beneath my bed, and when my eyes I turned
Without the window, such a light there burned
As would have made the noon-tide sunshine grey.
There on the floor one of my fellows lay,
Half-armed and groaning like a wounded man;
And circling round about the other ran,
With foaming lips as one driven mad with fear.
"Then I, who knew not what thing drew anear,
And scarce could think amidst my dread, sat still
Trembling a little space of time, until
To me from out the jaws of death was born,
Without a hope it seemed, a sudden scorn
Of death and fear; for all the worst I knew,
And many a thing seemed false that had been true,
And many a thing now seemed of little worth
That once had made the mean and sordid earth
All glorious.
"So with fixed and steady face
I armed myself, and turned to leave the place,
And passed from out it into the great hall
Of the very temple, where from wall to wall
There rolled a cloud of white and sulphurous smoke;
And there the remnant of the temple folk,
That had not heart enow to flee away,
Like dying folk upon the pavement lay,
And some seemed dead indeed. High o'er that gear
Stood golden Pallas, with her burnished spear
Glittering from out the smoke-cloud in that light,
That made strange day and ghastly of the night;
And her unmoved calm face that knew no smile
Cast no look down, as though she deemed too vile
The writhing tortured limbs, the sickening sound
Of dying groans of those that lay around,
Or to the pillars clung in agonies
Past telling of; but now I turned mine eyes,
Grown used to death within a little space,
Unto the other end of that fair place,
Where black the wood of polished pillars showed
Against the dreadful light, that throbbed and glowed,
Changing, and changing back to what it was.
So, through their rows did I begin to pass,
And heavier grew the smoke-cloud as I went;
But I, upon the face of death intent,
And what should come thereafter, made no stay

Until two fathom of white pavement lay
Betwixt me and the grass: the lit-up trees
Sparkled like quick-fire in the light night breeze,
And turned the sky black, and their stems between
The black depths of the inner wood were seen;
Like liquid flame a brook leapt out from them,
And, turning, ran along the forest hem:
'Twixt that and me——How shall I tell thereof,
And hope to 'scape hard word and bitter scoff?

"Let me say first that, changing horribly
That noise went on and seemed a part of me,
E'en as the light; unless by death I won
Quiet again; earth's peace seemed long years gone,
And all its hopes poor toys of little worth,
Therefore I turned not, nor fell down to earth,
And still within my hand I held my sword,
And saw it all as I see thee, fair lord.

"And this I saw: a mass, from whence there came
That fearful light, as from a heart of flame;
But black amid its radiance was that mass,
And black and claw-like things therefrom did pass,
Lengthening and shortening, and grey flocks of hair
Seemed moving on it with some inward air
The light bore with it; but in front of me
An upreared changing dark bulk did I see,
That my heart told me was the monster's head,
The seat of all the will that wrought our dread;
And midst thereof two orbs of red flame shone
When first I came, and then again were gone,
Then came again, like lights on a dark sea
As the thing turned. And now it seemed to me,
Moreover, that, despite the dreadful sound
That filled my very heart and shook the ground,
Mute was the horror's head, as the great shade
That sometimes, as in deep sleep we are laid
Seems ready to roll over us, and crush
Our souls to nought amidst the shadowy hush:
Nor might I know how that dread noise was
wrought.

"But, when unto the place I first was brought
Where now I stayed, and stared, I knew not well
If the thing moved; but deemed that I might tell
Ten fathoms o'er betwixt us, and midway
'Twixt me and it a temple-priest there lay,
Face foremost, armed, and in his hand a spear;
And as with fixed eyes I stood moveless there,
Striving to think how I should meet the thing,
Amidst that noise I heard his armour ring
As smitten by some stroke; and then I saw
Unto that hideous bulk the body draw,
And yet saw not what drew it; till at last
Into the huge dark mass it slowly passed.
Nor did the monster change; unless, methought
A little nigher thereto I was brought—
And still my eyes were fixed on it: with hand
Upon my drawn-back sword I still did stand,
Mid thoughts of folk who meet dread things alone
In dreadful lands, and slowly turn to stone.
So stood I: quicker grew my fevered breath,
Long, long, the time seemed betwixt life and death,
And I began to waver therewithal,
And at the last I opened lips to call
Aloud, and made no sound; then fell my brand
Clanging adown from out my feeble hand,
And rest seemed sweet again; one step I made
Aback, to gain a huge pier's deep black shade,
Then at my fallen sword in vain I stared,
And could not stoop to it——

"And then there blared
A new sound forth, I deemed a trumpet-blast,
And o'er mine eyes a dull thick veil seemed cast,
And my knees bent beneath me, and I fell
A dead heap to the earth, with death and hell
Once more a pain, and terrible once more,
Teaching me dreadful things of hidden lore,
Showing strange pictures to my soul forlorn
That cursed the wretched day when I was born.

"There lay I, as it seemed, a weary tide,
Nor knew I if I lived yet, or had died,
E'en as the other folk, of utter fear,
When in mine ears a new voice did I hear,
Nor knew at first what words it said to me;
Till my eyes opened, and I seemed to see,
Grown grey and soft, the marble pillars there,
And 'twixt their shafts afar the woodland fair,
As if through clear green water! then I heard
Close by my very head a kindly word:
'Be of good cheer! the earth is earth again,
And thou hadst heart enow to face the bane
Of Lycia, though the Gods would not that thou
Shouldst slay him utterly: but rise up now
If so thou mayst, and help me, for I bleed,
And of some leech-craft have I present need,
Though no life-blood it is that flows from me."

"Then clearer grew mine eyes, and I could see
An armed man standing over me, and I
Rose up therewith and stood unsteadily,
And gazed around, and saw that the fell light
Had vanished utterly: fast waned the night
And a cold wind blew, as the young dawn strove
With the low moon and the faint stars above,
And all was quiet. But that new-come man,
Standing beside me in the twilight wan,
Seemed like a god, come down to make again
Another earth all free from death and pain.
Tall was he, fair he seemed unto me then
Beyond the beauty of the sons of men:
But as our eyes met, and mine, shamed and weak,
Dropped before his, once more he 'gan to speak:

"'Be not ashamed,' he said, 'but look around,
And thou shalt see thy fear lie on the ground,
No more divine or dreadful.'
"Then I saw
A tangled mass of hair, and scale, and claw,
Lie wallowing on the grey down-trodden grass;
Huge was it certes, but nought like the mass
Of horror mid the light my fear still told
My shuddering heart of, nor could I behold
Clearly the monster's shape in that dim light;
Yet gladly did I turn me from the sight
Unto my fellow, and I said:
"'Hast thou
Some other shape unto mine eyes to show?
And is this part of the grim mockery
Whereto the Gods have driven me forth to die?
Or art thou such a dream as meets the dead
When first they die?'
"'I am a man,' he said,
'E'en as thou art; thou livest, if I live;
And some god unto me such strength did give,
That this my father's father's sword hath wrought
Deliverance for the Lycians, and made nought
This divine dread—but let us come again
When day is grown; and I have eased the pain
Of burning thirst that chokes me, and thine hands
Have swathed my hurts here with fair linen bands,
For somewhat faint I grow.'
"So then we passed
Betwixt the pillars till we reached at last
The chamber where I erst had slept, and there
We drank, and then his hurts with water fair
I bathed, and swathed them; and by then the day
Showed how my fellows on the pavement lay
Dead, yet without a wound it seemed; and when
Into the pillared hall we came again,
From one unto the other did we go
That lay about the place, and even so
It was with them; then the new-comer sighed
And said: 'Belike it was of fear they died,
Yet wish them not alive again, for they
Had found death fearful on another day;
But gladly had I never seen this sight,
For I shall think thereof at whiles by night,
And wonder if all life is worth such woe—
But now unto the quarry let us go.'

"So forth we went, but when we came whereas
The beast lay, slantwise o'er the wind-swept grass
Shone the low sun on what was left of him,
For all about the trodden earth did swim
In horrible corruption of black blood,
And in the midst thereof his carcase stood,
E'en like a keel beat down and cast away
At dead ebb high up in a sandy bay.
But when I gathered heart close up to go
And touch that master of all horror, lo,
How had he changed! for nothing now was there
But skin, beset with scale and dreadful hair
Drawn tight about the bones: flesh, muscle strong,
And all that helped the life of that great wrong,
Had ebbed away with life; his head, deep cleft
By the fair hero's sword-edge, yet had left
Three teeth like spears within it; on the ground
The rest had fallen, and now lay around
Half hidden in the marsh his blood had made;
Hollow his sides did sound when, still afraid
Of what he had been, with my clenched hand
I smote him. So a minute did we stand
Wondering, until my fellow said to me:

"'In the past night didst thou do valiantly,
So smite the head from off him, and then go
This finished work unto the King to show,
And tell him by that token that I come,
Who heretofore have had no quiet home
Either in Corinth or the Argive land.
Here till to-morrow bide I, to withstand
What new thing yet may come; for strange to me
Are all these things, nor know I if I be
Waking or sleeping yet, although methinks
My soul some foretaste of a great bliss drinks.
So get thee to the work, and then go forth;
These coming days in sooth will show the worth
Of what my hand hath wrought!'
"Weary he seemed
And spake, indeed, well-nigh as one who dreamed;
But yet his word I durst not disobey;
With no great pain I smote the head away
From off the trunk, and humbly bade farewell
Unto my godlike saviour from deep hell;
I gat my horse, and to the saddle bound
The monster's head, whose long mane swept the ground,
Whose weight e'en now was no light pack-horse load,
And so with merry heart went on my road,
And made on toward the city, where I thought
A little after nightfall to be brought;
But so it was, that ere I had gone through
The wasted country and now well-nigh drew
Unto the lands where people yet did dwell,
So dull a humour on my spirit fell,
That at the last I might not go nor stand;
So, holding still the reins in my right hand,
I laid me down upon the sunburnt grass
Of the road-side, and just high noon it was.
"But moonrise was it when I woke again;
My horse grazed close beside with dangling rein;
But when I called him, and he turned to me,
No burden on his back I now might see,
And wondered; for right firmly had I bound
The thing unto him; then I searched around

Lest he perchance had rolled, and in such wise
Had rid him of that weight; and as mine eyes
Grew used to the grey moonlight, I could trace
A line of greyish ashes, as from place
To greener place, the wandering beast had fed;
But nothing more I saw of that grim head.
Then much I wondered, and my fear waxed great,
And I 'gan doubt if there I should not wait
The coming of that glorious mighty one,
Who for the world so great a deed had done.
But at the last I thought it good to go
Unto the town e'en as he bade me do,
Because his words constrained me. Nought befell
Upon the road whereof is need to tell,
And so my tale is done; and though it be
That I no token have to show to thee,
Yet doubt not, King Jobates, that no more
The Gods will vex the land as heretofore
With this fell torment. Furthermore, if he
Who wrought this deed is no divinity
He will be here soon; so must thou devise,
O Lycian King, in whatso greatest wise
Thou wilt reward him—but for me, I pray
That thou wilt give me to him from to-day,
That serving him, and in his company,
Not wholly base I too become to be."

The King and captain for a little while
Gazed each at each; an ugly covert smile
Lurked round the captain's mouth, but the King stared
Blankly upon him, e'en as though he heard
A doom go forth against him; and again
The man who brought the news stared at the twain
With knitted brows, as greatly marvelling
Why they spake nought, until at last the King
Turned eyes upon him, and the captain spake:

"Certes, O King, brightly the day doth break
If this man sayeth sooth; nor know I one
To do this deed except Bellerophon;
And so much certes hast thou honoured him
That nothing now thy glory can wax dim
Because of his; and though indeed the earth
Hold nought within it of such wondrous worth
As that which thou wilt give him in reward,
Not overmuch it is for such a sword,
And such a heart, the people's very friend."

So spake he, and before his speech had end
His wonted face at last the King had got,
And spake unto the man:
"We doubt thee not;
Thy tale seems true, nor dost thou glorify
Thyself herein—certes thou wouldst abye
A heavy fate if thou shouldst lie herein—
So here shalt thou abide till sight we win
Of him who wrought this deed; then shalt thou have
A good reward, as one both true and brave
As for a son of man; for he, meseems,
Who made an end of our so fearful dreams
Is scarcely man, though friend to me a man—
But now this tale of thine, that well began
And went on clearly, clearly has not told
The very shape of what thou didst behold."

"No," said the man, "when I stood therebeside
Methought its likeness ever would abide
Within my mind! but now, what shall I say—
Hast thou not heard, O King, before to-day,
That it was three-formed? So men said to me,
Before its very body I did see
That, lion-like, the beast's shape was before,
And that its goat-like hairy middle bore
A dragon's scaly folds across the waste
Itself had made. But I, who oft have faced
The yellow beast, and driven goats afield,
And shaken the black viper from my shield,
Can liken it to these things in no whit.
Nay, as I try e'en now to think of it,
Meseems that when I woke in the past night,
E'en like a dream dissolved by morning light,
Its memory had gone from me; though, indeed,
Nought I forgot of all my dreadful need.
Content thee, King, with what I erst have told;
For when I try his image to behold
Faint grows my heart again, mine eyes wax dim,
Nor can I set forth what I deemed of him
When he lay dead.—Hearken,—what thing draws nigh?"

For from outside there rang a joyous cry,
That grew, still coming nearer, till they heard
From out the midst thereof a well-known word,
The name Bellerophon: then from his bed
The King arose, and clad himself, and said:

"Go, captain, set the King Bellerophon
Without delay upon the royal throne,
And tell him that I come to make my prayer,
That, since for a long time I have sat there,
And know no other trade than this of King,
He of his bounty yet will add a thing
To all that he hath given, and let me reign
Along with him. Send here my chamberlain,
That I may clothe me in right fitting guise
To do him honour in all goodly wise."

So spake his lips, but his eyes seemed to say:
"Long is it to the ending of the day,
And many a thing may hap ere eventide;
And well is he who longest may abide."

So from the presence did the captain pass,
When now the autumn morn in glory was,

And when he reached the palace court, he found
The eager people flocking all around
The door of the great hall, and diversely
Men showed their joyance at that victory.
But in the hall there stood Bellerophon
Anigh the daïs, and the young sun shone
On his bright arms, and round from man to man
In eager notes the hurried question ran,
And, smiling still, he answered each; but yet
Small share that circle of his tale did get,
Because distraught he was, and seemed to be
As he who looks the face of one to see
Who long delays; but when the captain's staff
Cleft through the people's eager word and laugh,
And, after that, his fellow of the night
Bellerophon beheld, his face grew bright
As one who sees the end. Withal he said
As they drew nigh:

"Has the King seen the head,
Knows he what it betokens? For, behold!
Before the sun of that day grew acold
Whereon thou left'st me, all that heap was gone
Thou sawest there, both hair and flesh and bone;
So when this dawn I mounted my good steed,
I looked to thee to show forth that my deed,
Lest all should seem a feigned tale or a dream."

"Master," the other said, "thou well mayst deem,
That what thy will loosed, my will might not hold;
E'en as thy tale, so must my tale be told,
And nought is left to show of that dread thing."

E'en as he spake did folk cry on the King,
And now to right and left fell back the crowd,
And down the lane of folk gold raiment glowed,
And blare of silver trumpets smote the roof.
Then said the captain:

"Certes, no more proof
The King will ask, to show that thou hast done
The glorious deed that was for thee alone;
Be glad, thy day is come, and all is well!"

But on his sword the hero's left hand fell,
And he looked down and muttered neath his breath,
"Trust slayeth many a man, the wise man saith;
Yet must I trust perforce." He stood and heard
The joyful people's many-voicéd word
Change into a glad shout; the feet of those
Who drew anear came closer and more close,
Till their sound ceased, and silence filled the hall:
And then a soft voice on his ears did fall,
That seemed the echo to his yearning thought:

"Look up, look up! the change of days hath brought
Sweet end to our desires, and made thee mine!"

He raised his eyes, and saw gold raiment shine
Before him in the low sun; but a face
Above it made the murmuring crowded place
Silent and lone; for there she stood, indeed,
His troublous scarce-kept life's last crown and meed;
Her sweet lips trembled, her dear eyes 'gan swim
In tears that fell not, as she reached to him
One hand in greeting, while a little raised
And restless was the other, as she gazed
Into his eyes, and lowly was her mien;
But yet a little forward did she lean,
As though she looked for sudden close embrace,
Yet feared it 'neath the strange eyes of that place.

But though his heart was melted utterly
Within him, he but drew a little nigh,
And took her hand, and said:

"What hour is this
That brings so fair a thing to crown my bliss?
What land far off from that which first I knew?
How shall I know that such a thing is true,
Unless some pain yet fall on thee and me?
Rather this hour is called eternity,
This land the land of heaven, and we have died
That thus at last we might go side by side
For ever, in the flower-strewn happy place."

Then closer to her drew his bright flushed face;
Well-nigh their lips met, when Jobates cried:
"Good hap, Corinthian! for thou hast not died;
The pale land holds no joy like thou shalt have
If yet awhile the gods thy dear life save;
Yet mayst thou fear, indeed, for such thou art,
That yet the gods will have thee play thy part
In heaven and not on earth—But come on now,
And see if this my throne be all too low
For thy great heart; sit here with me to-day,
And in the shrines of the Immortals pray,
With many offerings, lest they envy thee,
And on the morrow wed Philonoë,
And live thy life thereafter."

So he spake,
Smiling, and yet a troubled look did break
Across the would-be frankness of his smile.
But still the hero stood a little while
And watched Philonoë, as she turned and went
Adown the hall, and then a sigh he sent
From out his heart, and turned unto the King
As one who had no thought that anything
Of guile clung round him, and said:

"Deem thou not,
O King, that ruin from me thou hast got,
Although I take from thee my due reward;
For still for thee my hand shall hold the sword,
Nor will I claim more than thou givest me,
And great is that, though a King's son I be."

So on the throne was set Bellerophon,
And on his head was laid the royal crown
Instead of helm; and just as safe he felt
As though mid half-fed savage beasts he dwelt.
Yet when he went out through the crowded street,
Shouting because of him, when blossoms sweet
Faint with the autumn fell upon his head,
When his feet touched the silken carpet spread
Over the temple-steps; when the priests' hymn
Rang round him in the inner temple dim,
He smiled for pleasure once or twice, and said:
"So many dangers, yet I am not dead;
So many tears, yet sweet is longing grown,
Because to-morrow morn I gain my own!
So much desire, and but a night there is
Betwixt me and the perfecting of bliss!"

So fell the noisy day to feastful night,
For sleep was slow to hush the new delight
Of the freed folk; and in the royal house
Loud did the revellers grow, and clamorous,
And yet that too must have an end at last,
And to their sleeping-places all folk passed
Not long before the shepherds' sleep grew thin.
But listening to the changing of the din,
Philonoë lay long upon her bed,
Nor would sweet sleep come down to bless her head,
No, not when all was still again; for she,
Oppressed with her new-found felicity,
Had fallen to thoughts of life and death and change,
And through strange lands her wearied heart did range,
And knew no peace; therefore at last she rose
When all was utter stillness, and stood close
Unto the window. Such a night it was
That a thin wind swept o'er the garden-grass
And loosened the sick leaves upon the trees;
Promise of rain there was within the breeze,
Yet was the sky not wholly overcast,
But o'er the moon yet high the grey drift passed,
And with a watery gleam at whiles she shone,
And cast strange wavering shadows down upon
The trembling beds of autumn blossoms tall,
And made the dusk of the white garden wall
Gleam like another land against the sky.

She turned her from the window presently,
And went unto her dainty bed once more;
But as she touched its silk a change came o'er
Her anxious heart, and listening there she stood,
Counting the eager throbbing of her blood;
But nought she heard except the night's dim noise;
Then did she whisper (and her faint, soft voice
Seemed hoarse and loud to her)—"Yet will I go
To Pallas' shrine, for fain I am to know
If all things even yet may go aright,
For my heart fails me."
To the blind dusk night
She showed her loveliness awhile half-veiled,
After her words, as though her purpose failed;
Then softly did she turn and take to her
A dusky cloak, and hid her beauty rare
In its dark folds, and turned unto the door;
But ere she passed its marble threshold o'er
Stayed pondering, and thus said:
"Alas, alas!
To-morrow must I say that all this was
And is not—this sweet longing?—what say men—
It cometh once and cometh not again,
This first love for another? holds the earth
Within its circle aught that is of worth
When it is dead?—and this is part of it,
This measureless sweet longing that doth flit,
Never to come again, when all is won.
And is our first desire so soon foredone,
Like to the rose-bud, that through day and night
In early summer strives to meet the light,
And in some noon-tide of the June, bursts sheath,
And ere the eve is past away in death?
Belike love dies then like the rest of life?
—Or falls asleep until it mix with strife
And fear and grief?—and then we call it pain,
And curse it for its labour lost in vain.
"Sweet pain! be kind to me and leave me not!
Leave me not cold, with all my grief forgot,
And all the joy consumed I thought should fill
My changing troubled days of life, until
Death turned all measuring of the days to nought!
"And thou, O death, when thou my life hast caught
Within thy net, what wilt thou with my love,
That now I deem no lapse of time can move?
O death, maybe that though I seem to pass
And come to nought, with all that once I was,
Yet love shall live which once was part of me,
And hold me in his heart despite of thee,
And call me part of him, when I am dead
As the world talks of dying."
So she said,
But scarcely heard her voice, and through the door
Of her own chamber passed; light on the floor
Her white feet fell, her soft clothes rustled nought,
As slowly, wrapped in many a changing thought,
Unto the Maiden's shrine she took her way
That midmost of the palace precincts lay;
But in a chamber that was hard thereby,
Although she knew it not, that night did lie
Her love that was, her lord that was to be.

Through the dark pillared precinct, silently
She went now, pausing every now and then
To listen, but heard little sound of men;

Though far off in the hill-side homesteads crowed
The waking fowl, or restless milch-kine lowed
In the fair pastures that her love had saved;
And from the haven, as the shipmen heaved
Their sail aloft, a mingled strange voice came.

So as she went, across her flitted shame
Of her own loneliness, and eager love
That shut the world out so, and she 'gan move
With quicker steps unto the temple-stead,
Scarce knowing what her soft feet thither led.

Within an open space the temple was,
And dark-stemmed olives rose up from the grass
About it, but a marble path passed o'er
The space betwixt the cloister and its door
Of some ten yards; there on its brink she stayed,
And from the cloister watched the black trees swayed
In the night breeze. E'en as a bather might
Shrink from the water, from the naked night
She shrank a little—the wind wailed within
The cloister walls, the clouds were gotten thin
About the moon, and the night 'gan to wane—
Then, even as she raised her skirts again,
And put her foot forth, did she hear arms clash,
And fear and shame her heart did so abash,
She shrank behind a pillar; then the sound
Of footsteps smote upon the hardened ground,
And 'gainst the white steps of the shrine she saw
From out the trees a tall dark figure draw
Unto the holy place: the moon withal
Ran from a cloud now, and her light did fall
Upon a bright steel helm: she trembled then,
But her first thought was not of sons of men;
Of the armed goddess, rather, did she think,
And closer in her hiding-place did shrink.

Then though the moon grew dull again, yet she
Ten shapes of armed men at the last could see
Steal up the steps and vanish from the night,
And a sharp pang shot through her; but affright
She felt not now of gods: she murmured low;
"What do these men-at-arms in such guise now
Amidst the feast? God help me, we are caught
Within a brazen net!"
And with that thought
No more delay she made, but girt her gown
Unto her, and with swift feet went adown
The marble steps, and so from tree to tree,
Through all the darkest shadow, silently
Gained the dark side of the brass temple door;
And through its chink she saw the marble floor
Just feebly lit by some small spark of light
She saw not, and the gleam of armour white,
And knew that she unto the men was close.

E'en as some sound that loud and louder grows
Within our dreams and yet is nought at all
She heard her heart, as clinging to the wall
She strove to listen vainly; but at last
All feebleness from out her did she cast
With thought of love—and death that drew anear—
And therewithal a low voice did she hear,
She thought she knew.
"Milo the Colchian?"
It said as asking, and another man
Said "Here" in a hoarse voice and low; once more
The first voice said: "The Clearer of the Shore,
Known by no other name the people say,
Art thou here too?" a new voice muttered "Yea."
And then again the first:
"My tale told o'er
And none found wanting—since ye know wherefore
We here are met, few words are best to-night:
Within the ivory chamber, called the White,
Lies the ill monster's bane, asleep belike,
Or, at the worst without a sword to strike,
Or shield to ward withal; his wont it is
To have few by him; on this night of bliss
Those few of night-cropped herbs enow have drunk,
And deep in slumber like short death are sunk:
So light our work is; yet let those who lack
Heart thereunto e'en at this hour go back;
Though—let these take good heed that whatsoe'er
We risk hereafter they in likewise share,
Except the risk of dying by his sword."

He ceased awhile, and a low muttered word
Seemed to say, "We are ready:" then he said:

"When he is slain, then shall ye bear his bed
Into this shrine, and burn what burned may be
In little space; but into the deep sea
Thou Clearer of the Shore, with thy two men
Shalt bear him forth.—Fellows, what say we then
When on the morn the city wakes to find
Its saviour gone? This:—'Men are fools and blind
And the Gods all-wise; this man born on earth
By some strange chance, yet was of too great worth
To live, and go as common men may go;
Therefore the Gods, who set him work to do,
When that was done, had no more will to see
His head grow white; or with man's frailty
Burn out his heart; they might not hear him curse
His latter days, as unto worse and worse
He fell at last; therefore they took him hence
To make him sharer in omnipotence,
And crown him with their immortality,

Nor may ye hope his body more to see.
These ashes of the web wherein last lay
His godlike limbs that took your fear away
(Limbs now a very god's), this fire-stained gold
That, unharmed, very god might nowise hold
Are left for certain signs—so shall ye rear
A temple to him nigh the gate; and bear
Gifts of good things unto the one who wrought
Deliverance for you, when ye e'en were brought
Unto the very gate of death and hell.'

"Fellows, spread vaguely this tale that I tell!
But thou, O Chremes, when the work is done,
Get straight unto the forest all alone,
And with some slaughtered beast come back again
Ere noon, as though of hearers thou wert fain;
Folk know thee for a wanderer through the wood,
So make thy tale up as thou deemest good
Of voices heard by thee at dead of night;
So shall our words live and all things be right.
"Come, then; the night is changing; good it were
That dawn's first glimmer did not find us here!"

So spake he, and then opened wide the door,
And all seemed lonely there as heretofore;
So one by one adown the steps they stole,
Setting their anxious faces to the goal
Of the White Chamber. But Philonoë,
Fair-footed, tender-limbed, and where was she?
Her sick heart did but note the name and place
They spoke of, ere she moved her woe-worn face
From the cold brass, and stayed to hear no more,
But stole away as silent as before,
Keeping love back till all were lost or won;
Nor knew she what she set her feet upon
Till, panting, through his chamber-door she passed;
There through the dusk a quick glance round she cast
And saw his men asleep, nor knew if they
Were dead, or if in sleep indeed they lay;
Then with such haste as a spent man, borne down
A swift stream, catches at some bare bough brown,
From off the wall she took sword, shield, and spear,
Hauberk and helm, and drew his bed anear,
And stayed not now, nor thought, but on his breast,
Laid bare before her, a light hand she pressed,
And as he started upright in the bed
Beneath her touch, bowed down to him and said:

"Speak not, but listen to Philonoë,
Thy love, and save thy life for thee and me!
Thy foes are on thee! make no more delay
As thou art wise!—needs must I go away;
I do my part—one minute more shall show,
If love in death or life we are to know."

His lips yet trembled, yet his heart did ache
With longing, ere he felt he was awake
And knew that she was gone, and knew not where:
So driving back desire he armed him there
Over his nakedness, and hastily
Caught up his weapons, and turned round to see
What help was nigh: and when he saw his men
Lie on the floor as dead, well deemed he then
His hour was come; and yet he felt as though
He scarce might tell if it were hard to go,
So short all life seemed that must end at last:
But therewith nowise hope from him he cast,
But on the golden bed he took his stand,
And poised the well-steeled spear in his right hand,
And waited listening.

Mid the fallen leaves' sound,
Driven by the autumn wind along the ground,
Footfalls of stealthy men he seemed to hear;
Yet nowise might that minute teach him fear,
Who life-long had not learned to speak the name;
Calm to his lips his steady breath still came,
Well-nigh he smiled; wide open were his eyes,
As though they looked to see life's mysteries
Unfolded soon before them; as he gazed
Through the dusk room, he heard the light latch raised
And saw the door move.

Even therewithal
A gleam of bright light from the sky did fall,
As from a fleecy cloud the white moon ran,
And smiling, stern, unlike the face of man,
His helmed head high o'er the black-shadowed floor
Showed strange and dreadful, as the ivory door
Swung back on well-oiled hinges silently.

Silence a little space yet,—then a cry
Burst from his lips, and through the chamber rang
A shriek of fear therewith, and a great clang
Of falling arms, and the bright glittering brand
Instead of the long spear was in his hand.
But for his foes, across the threshold lay
Their leader slain, and those his fellows, they
Hung wavering by the door, and feared the night,
And feared the godlike man, who in his might
Seemed changed indeed according to the tale
They were to tell: but as with faces pale
And huddled spears they hung there, in their doubt
If he were God or man, a mighty shout
Came from his lips again, and there was cast
Across the windy night a huge horn's blast,
Hoarse, loud, and long-enduring; and they fled
This way and that, pursued by nought but dread.

But strange tales of that night of fear they told
In after days. Some said they did behold,
As through the mighty outer door they ran,
A woman greater than a child of man,

All armed and helmed: some told of a bright flame
Glowing about the hero, when they came
Unto the door, and said that his one word
Had slain their leader swifter than a sword.

But for Bellerophon, awhile he stood
Nigh to the door until his wrathful mood
Changed into scorn; and then the moonlight wan
With kindled light he helped, and then the man
His spear had reached in strong arms he upraised;
But when he saw the eyes that on him gazed
With dead stare, then he knew the captain's face.
"Fool," said he, "fear hath brought thee to this ease,
Long hadst thou lived for me—but is this all?
Will not the voice of Sthenobœa call
O'er the green waves to ghosts of lovers dead,
Ere yet the bridal wreath is on my head?"

E'en as he spake he heard the horn once more,
And then a sound as if on a low shore
The sea were breaking, then a swelling shout
That louder grew, till his own name leapt out
From midst of it, and then he smiled and cried:

"Prœtus, thy casket held a goodly bride,
A noble realm for me! O love, I come;
Surely thine heart has won me a fair home,
Instead of that straight house I should have had
If these eyes had not made thy dear heart glad."

Therewith he sheathed his sword, and, stepping o'er
His cumbered threshold, made for the great door,
Whither the wakened house now thronging ran:
Men armed and unarmed, child and ancient man;
For death it was to wind that mighty horn,
But when in dangerous battle it was borne
By the King's hand. Now nigher as he drew
Unto the door he 'gan to see therethrough
The points of steel tossing amid the light
Of torches, and the wind of waning night
Bore sound of many men on it; but dim
The pillared hall was yet. Then close to him
A slim close-mantled woman came and said:

"Go forth and speak—we twain are not yet dead
I think we shall not die at all, dear heart;
Farewell!"
His soul and body seemed to part,
As swiftly, shadow-like, she passed him by,
And toward her chamber went: unwittingly
He gained the great door's platform, and looked down
Upon the tumult of the gathering town.
While at his back a dark mass clustered now,
With helmet on the head, and spear and bow;
So, gathering earthly thoughts, he stood and cried:

"What will ye, good men, that ye make this tide
More noisy than the day? What will ye do?
Speak out, that we may rest, some one of you!"

Then stood a man forth, clad in armour bright,
And cried aloud: "O, well betide the night
That hides thee not from us, Bellerophon!
Surely we deemed some horror had been done,
And deemed the Gods had ta'en thee from our hands;
Because the horn, the terror of far lands,
The gift of Neptune, did we seem to hear."

Then said the hero: "Ah, then all the fear
The beast divine brought with it is not gone!
Masters, ye dreamed belike—nor dreamed alone
Strange dreams; for I dreamed too,—that all-armed men
Beset my door to take my life; and when
I went therefrom e'en now, why yet I dreamed
E'en as I went upright—because meseemed
Over my threshold lay a man new slain.
Be merry, O my masters; go again
Unto your well-hung beds; to-morrow comes,
Whereon ye praise the Gods for your saved homes
With great rejoicings, and raise hands for me
And my beloved midst your festivity."

He ceased, and a great shout the twilight rent,
And one by one unto their homes they went.
Then turned the Prince unto the palace band,
And saw a certain one on his right hand,
Making as he would speak, and knew him straight
To be the man who had the heart to wait
The beast now slain. Smiling on him, he said:
"What, hast thou dreamed the monster was not dead?
Good is it that the grain is gathered in,
Else should men dream that they the crop did win
Last week, and let it stand afield to rot!"

"Nay," said the man, "O master, I dreamed not;
But from yon flanking tower, waking, I saw
A shadowy figure toward the great horn draw,
And blow a blast thereon, then vanish quite,
Not like a mortal thing, into the night."

Then spake a grey old man: "Yea, think thereon
As of a portent, O Bellerophon,
Of wondrous things to come, that thou shalt see,
As showing forth how great thy days shall be;
For doubt not this was Pallas, who would show
How great a gift she gives the city now."

Again from these there rang a joyous shout;
But the Prince hung his head, as if in doubt
Of the new time with hidden lies begun.
At last he said:

"Go, friends, ere yet the sun
Has slain the stars outright; what things soe'er
May hap, the Gods will have of me good care,
This night at least!"
So through the house they went
Each to his place, when nigh the night was spent.
But when to his own door Bellerophon
Was come, the captain's body was clean gone,
And the drugged men were waking. Then he thought,
"Was it a dream, indeed, that these things brought
Before mine eyes? Nay, my lips tremble yet
With that sweet touch. My breast may more forget
This hauberk's weight, than that sweet clinging hand.
I dreamed not, and this haunted Lycian land
Holds for me good and evil infinite.
So be it, and the new returning light
Shall bring new rede to guard my troubled ways.
May the Gods give beginning of good days!"

Then on the bed he sat to think of her,
But ere the end of the grey time was there
His head had fallen aside; sleeping he lay,
And let the bright sun bring about the day.

He woke at last, and fresh and joyous felt,
As forth he went; no sword within his belt
He set that morn; he bore no biting spear;
But clad he was in gold and royal gear,
Such as a King might bear in Saturn's reign;
And in such wise the great hall did he gain,
And on the ivory throne he sat him down,
And felt the golden circle of the crown,
But light as yet, upon his unused head.
Then to his presence were strange people led;
Hunters from far-off corners of the realm,
Shipmen with hands well hardened by the helm,
Merchants who in strange tongues must bid him thrive,
And dainty cherished things unto him give:
And still he wearied, and their words forgot,
And wondered why the other King came not.

But yet, before the ending of the morn,
The casket that his own hands once had borne,
Was brought unto him by a man, who spake
In this wise:
"King Jobates bids thee take,
O King Bellerophon, what lies herein,
And saith that since thine office doth begin
This day, right good it were to judge of this—
If the man did so utterly amiss
To strive to keep his oath. He bids thee say
Withal if thou wilt have what yesterday
He gave unto thine hands—and, taking it,
Forget wild dreams that o'er the year did flit."

Then King Bellerophon looked down, and drew
A letter from that casket that he knew,
And opened it and read; and in such wise
It gave the key to half-deemed mysteries.

King Prætus to Jobates, King of men,
Sends goodly greeting.—Dost thou mind thee when
I saved thee from the lions? then I had
One gift from thee which has not made me glad,
Thy daughter; though a goddess, all men said,
Had scarce been fairer at my board and bed.—
Another thing thou gav'st me then,—an oath
To do my bidding once, if lieve or loath
It were to thee. Now bring all to an end,
And slay the man who bears this—once my friend,
And still too close unto my memory,
That on my skirts his treacherous blood should lie.
Take heed, though, that I say, myself, at whiles,
"The Gods are full of lies and luring smiles,
And know no faith." And this Bellerophon
May be a god; being even such an one
As seemeth kind beyond the wont of men,
Just and far-seeing, brave in those times when
Men's hearts grow sick with fear. Lo, such is he,
And yet a monster! He shall dwell with thee
Life-long, perchance; and once or twice Desire
Shall burn up all these things, as with a fire;
And he shall tread his kindness under foot,
And turn a liar e'en from his heart's root,
And turn a wretched fool. Yea, what say I?
Turn a mere trembling coward, loth to die,
Rather than be all this. So take him, then,
While yet thou deem'st him first of mortal men,
And in forefront of battle let him fall;
Or, lonely, on some foeman's spear-swept wall,
If it may be;—that he may leave behind
A savour, sweet in some men's mouths, nor find
That he has fallen to hell while yet he lives.

Such counsel to thee, friend, King Prætus gives—
A hapless man. But happy mayst thou dwell,
As thou shalt keep thy faith. Live hale and well!

Not clear he saw these latter words of it,
For many a memory through his heart did flit,
Blinding his eyes belike: at last his head
He raised, and to the messenger he said:

"Say to Jobates that I deem the man
Did even with his oath as such men can,
Who fear the Gods so much they may not tell
What gifts men give them. Say that all is well,
That I will take the gift he gave to me,
And long right sore that World's Desire to see."

So the man went, and left Bellerophon
Pensive, and pondering on the days long gone
That brought him unto this: his happy love
The heart within him did to pity move;
He thought, "Alas! and can it ever be
That one can say, 'Thou art enough for me—
And I, and I—wilt thou not suffer it,
That I, at least, before thy feet may sit
Until perchance I grow enough for thee?"
Alas, alas! and can it ever be
That thus a heart shall plead and plead, in vain?"

So did he murmur; but withal a strain
Of merry music made him lift his head
Slaying all thought of suffering folk or dead;
And even as a man new made a god,
When first he sets his foot upon the sod
Of Paradise, and like a living flame
Joy wraps him round, he felt, as now she came,
Clear won at last, the thing of all the earth
That made his fleeting life a little worth.

My hearts faints now, my lips that tell the tale
Falter to think that such a life should fail;
That use, and long days dropping one by one,
As the wan water frets away the stone,
Should change desires of men, and what they bring,
E'en while their hearts with sickening longing cling
Unto the thought that they are still the same,
When all they were is grown an empty name.

O Death-in-life, O sure pursuer, Change,
Be kind, be kind, and touch me not, till strange,
Changed too, thy face shows, when thy fellow Death
Delays no more to freeze my faltering breath!

THE dull day long had faded into night
Ere all was done; taper and red fire-light
Cast on the wall's fair painted images
Shadows confused of some; amidst of these,
The old men on the daïs; down below
Amid the youths was stir and murmur now;
Some said they fain had known a little more
Of that Bellerophon ere all was o'er;
Some said, that if the man lived, sure it was
That happiness of his would soon o'erpass,
Because he kept back something of the stake:
Some said the story back their thoughts did take
To Argos, and the deeds there, and the end
Whereto the feet of Sthenobœa did wend
So surely from the first, not without praise
Of some, they said: some wondered of the days
That Prœtus had, and if the godlike man
And he, who clung to joy as cowards can,
E'er met again, and what things they forgat
And what remembered, if it came to that.

But one youth who had sat alone and sad,
While others friends and loves beside them had,
Rose up amid their talk, and slowly turned
To where the many lights that thereby burned
Scarce reached, and in that dimness walked awhile;
And when he came back, with a quivering smile
On his sad face, gazed at the elders there,
As though he deemed his place among them were,
Who had nigh done with life; and one or two
Among the youths looked up, as if they knew
The pain that ailed him.

Many-peopled earth!
In foolish anger and in foolish mirth,
In causeless wars that never had an aim,
In worshipping the kings that bring thee shame,
In spreading lies that hide wrath in their breast,
In breaking up the short-lived days of rest,—
—In all thy folk care nought for, how they cling
Each unto each, fostering the foolish thing,
Nought worth, grown out of nought, that lightly lies
'Twixt throat and lips, and yet works miseries!
While in this love that touches every one,
Still wilt thou let each man abide alone,
Unholpen, with his pain unnameable!
Is it, perchance, lest men should come to tell
Each unto other what a pain it is,
How little balanced by the sullied bliss
They win for some few minutes of their life,—
Lest they die out and leave thee void of strife,
Empty of all their yearning and their fear,
'Twixt storm and sunshine of thy changing year?

LATE February days; and now, at last,
Might you have thought that winter's woe was past
So fair the sky was, and so soft the air.
The happy birds were hurrying here and there,
As something soon would happen. Reddened now
The hedges, and in gardens many a bough
Was overbold of buds. Sweet days, indeed,
Although past road and bridge, through wood and mead,
Swift ran the brown stream, swirling by the grass,
And in the hill-side hollows snow yet was.

Within sound of the city, yet amid
Patches of woodland that its white walls hid,
The house was, where the elders sat this tide,
The young folk with them; by the highway-side
The first starred yellow blossoms of the spring
Some held in hand; some came in, hurrying
From deeper in the woods, and now in fold
Of skirt and gown its treasures did they hold;
And soon to garland-making youth and maid
Were set down: then the Swabian smiled, and said:

"However it be that I, so old and grey,
A priest too, yet again must have to say
More words of Venus, judge ye, maids: in sooth,
I, wandering once in long-past days of youth,
Came to the place my tale shall tell of now.
Vague tales, wherein I was well fain to trow,
Being dreamy and a youth, I oft had heard
Thereof, yet somewhat I did grow afeard
Before that cavern, although not alone
I was there, and the morn was such an one
As this fair morn has been: my fellow there
Was an old forester with thin white hair—
Lo you, like mine now!—but his deep-set eyes,
Bright mid his wrinkles, made him seem right wise—
—As I would fain seem, maidens.—Ye may wot
That many a tale of that place had he got,
Because nearby, child, boy, and man, had he
Dwelt ever: so on a felled oaken tree
We sat beside the cave's mouth there of old
While he this story, that I looked for, told.

THE HILL OF VENUS.

ARGUMENT.

This story tells of a certain man who by strange adventure fell into the power of Venus, and who, repenting of his life with her, was fain to return to the world and amend all, but might not; for his repentance was rejected of men, by whomsoever it was accepted.

A CERTAIN summer afternoon day hung
Doubtful 'twixt storm and sunshine, and the earth
Seemed waiting for the clouds to spread, that clung
About the south-east, ere its morning mirth,
Ere all the freshness of its hopeful birth,
Should end in dreadful darkness, and the clash
Of rain-beat boughs and wildering lightning-flash.

Such a tide brooded o'er the ancient wood,
Wild with sour waste and rough untended tree,
Which, long before the coming of the Rood,
Men held a holy place in Germany;
Yea, and still looked therein strange things to see,
Still deemed that dark therein was uglier
Than in all other wilds, more full of fear.

Grim on that day it was, when the sun shone
Clear through the thinner boughs, and yet its light
Seemed threatening; such great stillness lay upon
The wide-head oaks, such terror as of night
Waylaying day, made the sward yet more bright,
As, blotting out the far-away blue sky,
The hard and close-packed clouds spread silently.

Now 'twixt the trees slowly a knight there rode,
Musing belike; a seemly man and fair,
No more a youth, but bearing not the load
Of many years; he might have seen the wear
Of thirty summers: why he journeyed there
Nought tells the tale, but Walter doth him name,
And saith that from the Kaiser's court he came.

Dull enow seemed his thoughts, as on he went
From tree to tree, with heavy knitted brow,
And eyes upon the forest grass intent;
And oft beneath his breath he muttered low,
And once looked up and said: "The earth doth grow
Day after day a wearier place belike;
No word for me to speak, no blow to strike:

"Once I looked not for this and it has come;
What shall the end be now I look for worse?
Woe worth the dull walls of mine ancient home,
The ragged fields laid 'neath the ancient curse!
Woe worth false hope that dead despair doth nurse
Woe worth the world's false love and babbling hate—
O life, vain, grasping, uncompassionate!"

He looked around as thus he spake, and saw
That he amidst his thoughts had ridden to where
The close wood backward for a space did draw,
Leaving a plain of sweet-grown sward all clear,
Till at the end thereof a cliff rose sheer
From the green grass, o'er which again arose
A hill-side clad with fir-trees dark and close.

Now nigh the cliff a little river ran,
And bright with sun were hill and mead, although
Already, far away, the storm began
To rumble, and the storm-lift moving slow,
Over a full third of the sky to grow,
Though still within its heart the tumult stayed,
Content as yet to keep the world afraid.

There had he drawn rein, and his eyes were set
Upon a dark place in the sheer rock's side,
A cavern's mouth; and some new thought did get
Place in his heart therewith, and he must bide
To nurse the thing; for certes far and wide
That place was known, and by an evil fame;
The Hill of Venus had it got to name.

And many a tale yet unforgot there was
Of what a devilish world, dream-like, but true,

Would snare the o'er-rash man whose feet should pass
That cavern's mouth: old folk would say they knew
Of men who risked it; nor came back to rue
The losing of their souls; and others told
Of how they watched, when they were young and bold,

Midsummer night through: yea, and not in vain;
For on the stream's banks, and the flowery mead,
Sights had they seen they might not tell again;
And in their hearts that night had sown the seed
Of many a wild desire and desperate need;
So that, with longings nought could satisfy,
Their lives were saddened till they came to die.

For all the stories were at one in this,
That still they told of a trap baited well
With some first minutes of unheard-of bliss;
Then, these grasped greedily, the poor fool fell
To earthly evil, or no doubtful hell.
Yet, as these stories flitted by all dim,
The knight's face softened, sweet they seemed to him.—

He muttered: "Yea, the end is hell and death,
The midmost hid, yet the beginning Love.
Ah me! despite the worst Love threateneth,
Still would I cling on to the skirts thereof,
If I could hope his sadness still could move
My heart for evermore.—— A little taste
Of the king's banquet, then all bare and waste

"My table is; fresh guests are hurrying in
With eager eyes, there to abide their turn,
That they more hunger therewithal may win!
Ah me! what skill for dying love to yearn?
Yet, O my yearning! though my heart should burn
Into light feathery ash, blown here and there,
After one minute of that odorous flare."

With that once more he hung his head adown;
The name of Love such thoughts in him had stirred,
That somewhat sweet his life to him was grown,
And like soft sighs his breathing now he heard;
His heart beat like a lover's heart afeard;
Of such fair women as he erst had seen,
The names he named, and thought what each had been.

Yet, as he told them over one by one,
But dimly might he see their forms, and still
Some lack, some coldness, cursed them all, and none
The void within his straining heart might fill;
For evermore, as if against his will,
Words of old stories, turned to images
Of lovelier things, would blur the sight of these.

Long dwelt he in such musings, though his beast
From out his hand had plucked the bridle-rein,
And, wandering slowly onward, now did feast
Upon the short sweet herbage of the plain;
So when the knight raised up his eyes again,
Behind his back the dark of the oakwood lay,
And nigh unto its end was grown the day.

He gazed round toward the west first, and the stream,
Where all was bright and sunny, nor would he
Have deemed himself deep fallen into a dream
If he had seen the grass swept daintily
By raiment that in old days used to be;
When white 'neath Pallas' smile and Juno's frown
Gleamed Venus from the gold slow slipping down.

But void was all the meadow's beauty now,
And to the east he turned round with a sigh,
And saw the hard lift blacker and blacker grow
'Neath the world's silence, as the storm drew nigh;
And to his heart there went home suddenly
A sting of bitter hatred and despair,
That these things, his own heart had made so fair,

He might not have; and even as he gazed,
And the air grew more stifling yet and still,
Down in the east a crooked red line blazed,
And soon the thunder the eve's hush did fill,
Low yet, but strong, persistent as God's will.
He cried aloud: "A world made to be lost,—
A bitter life 'twixt pain and nothing tossed!"

And therewithal he stooped and caught the rein,
And turned his horse about till he did face
The cavern in the hill, and said: "Ah, vain
My yearning for enduring bliss of days
Amidst the dull world's hopeless, hurrying race,
Where the past gain each new gain makes a loss,
And yestreen's golden love to-day makes dross!"

And as he spake, slowly his horse 'gan move
Unto the hill: "To-morrow and to-day,
Why should I name you, so I once hold Love
Close to my heart? If others fell away,
That was because within their souls yet lay
Some hope, some thought of making peace at last
With the false world, when all their love was past."

But strangely light therewith his heart did grow,
He knew not why; and yet again he said:
"A wondrous thing that I this day must trow
In tales that poets and old wives have made!
Time was when duly all these things I weighed.
Yet, O my heart—what sweetens the dull air?
What is this growing hope, so fresh and fair?"

Then therewithal louder the thunder rolled,
And the world darkened, for the sun was down;
A fitful wind 'gan flicker o'er the wold,
And in scared wise the woods began to moan,
And fast the black clouds all the sky did drown;
But his eyes glittered,—a strange smile did gleam
Across his face, as in a happy dream.

Again he cried: "Thou callest me; I come;
I come, O lovely one! Oh, thou art nigh;
Like a sweet scent, the nearness of thine home
Is shed around; it lighteth up God's sky—
O me, thy glory!" Therewith suddenly
The lightning streamed across the gathering night,
And his horse swerved aside in wild affright.

He heeded not except to spur him on;
He drew his sword as if he saw a foe,
And rode on madly till the stream he won,
And, even as the storm-wind loud 'gan blow,
And the great drops fell pattering, no more slow,
Dashed through the stream and up the other bank,
And leaped to earth amidst his armour's clank,

And faced the wild white rain, and the wind's roar,
The swift wide-dazzling lightning strange of hue,
The griding thunder, saying: "No more, no more,
Helpless and cruel, do I deal with you,
Or heed the things the false world calleth true.
Surely mine eyes in spite of you behold
The perfect peace Love's loving arms enfold."

Then, whirling o'er his head his glittering sword,
Into the night he cast it far away;
And turning round, without another word
Left the wild tumult of the ruined day,
And into the darkness that before him lay
Rushed blindly, while the cold rain-bearing wind
Wailed after him, and the storm clashed behind.

A few steps through black darkness did he go,
Then turned and stayed, and with his arms outspread
Stood tottering there a little while, as though
He fain would yet turn back; some words he said
If the storm heard, then fell, and as one dead
Lay long, not moving, noting not how soon
Above the dripping boughs outshone the moon.

He woke up with the tears upon his cheek,
As though awakened from some dream of love,
And as his senses cleared felt strange and weak,
And would not open eyes or try to move,
Since he felt happy and yet feared to prove
His new-born bliss, lest it should fade from him
E'en as in waking grows the love-dream dim.

A half hush was there round about, as though
Beast, bird, and creeping thing went each their ways,
Yet needs must keep their voices hushed and low,
For worship of the sweet love-laden days.
Most heavenly odours floated through the place,
Whate'er it was, wherein his body lay,
And soft the air was as of deathless May.

At last he rose with eyes fixed on the ground,
And therewithal his armour's clinking seemed
An overloud and clean unlooked-for sound:
He trembled; even yet perchance he dreamed,
Though strange hope o'er his wondering heart there streamed;
He looked up; in the thickest of a wood
Of trees fair-blossomed, heavy-leaved, he stood.

He turned about and looked; some memory
Of time late past, of dull and craving pain,
Made him yet look the cavern's mouth to see
Anigh behind him: but he gazed in vain,
For there he stood, as a man born again,
'Midst a close break of eglantine and rose,
With no deed now to cast aside or choose.

Yet, as a man new born at first may hear
A murmur in his ears of life gone by,
Then in a flash may see his past days clear,
The pain, the pleasure, and the strife, all nigh,
And stripped of every softening veil and lie,—
So did he hear, and see, and vainly strive
In one short minute all that life to live.

But even while he strove, as strong as sleep,
As swift as death, came deep forgetfulness,
Came fresh desire unnamed; his heart did leap
With a fresh hope, a fresh fear did oppress
The new delight, that else cried out to bless
The unchanging softness of that unknown air,
And the sweet tangle round about him there.

Trembling, and thinking strange things to behold,
The interwoven boughs aside he drew,
And softly, as though sleep the world did hold,
And he should not awake it, passed them through
Into a freer space; yet nought he knew
Why he was thither come, or where to turn,
Or why the heart within him so did burn.

Then through the wood he went on, and for long
Heard but the murmur of the prisoned breeze,
Or overhead the wandering wood-dove's song;
But whiles amid the dusk of far-off trees
He deemed he saw swift-flitting images,
That made him strive in vain to call to mind
Old stories of the days now left behind.

Slowly he went, and ever looking round
With doubtful eyes, until he heard at last
Across the fitful murmur of dumb sound,
Far off and faint the sound of singing cast
Upon the lonely air; the sound went past,
And on the moaning wind died soft away,
But, as far thunder startles new-born day,

So was his dream astonied therewithal,
And his lips strove with some forgotten name,
And on his heart strange discontent did fall,
And wild desire o'ersweet therefrom did flame;
And then again adown the wind there came
That sound grown louder; then his feet he stayed
And listened eager, joyous and afraid.

Again it died away, and rose again,
And sank and swelled, and sweeter and stronger grew,
Wrapping his heart in waves of joy and pain,
Until at last so near his ears it drew
That very words amid its notes he knew,
And stretched his arms abroad to meet the bliss,
Unnamed indeed as yet, but surely his.

SONG.

Before our lady came on earth
Little there was of joy or mirth;
About the borders of the sea
The sea-folk wandered heavily;
About the wintry river side
The weary fishers would abide.

Alone within the weaving-room
The girls would sit before the loom,
And sing no song, and play no play;
Alone from dawn to hot mid-day,
From mid-day unto evening,
The men afield would work, nor sing,
'Mid weary thoughts of man and God,
Before thy feet the wet ways trod.

Unkissed the merchant bore his care,
Unkissed the knights went out to war,
Unkissed the mariner came home,
Unkissed the minstrel men did roam.

Or in the stream the maids would stare,
Nor know why they were made so fair;
Their yellow locks, their bosoms white,
Their limbs well wrought for all delight,
Seemed foolish things that waited death,
As hopeless as the flowers beneath
The weariness of unkissed feet:
No life was bitter then, or sweet.

Therefore, O Venus, well may we
Praise the green ridges of the sea
O'er which, upon a happy day,
Thou cam'st to take our shame away.
Well may we praise the curdling foam
Amidst the which thy feet did bloom,
Flowers of the gods; the yellow sand
They kissed atwixt the sea and land;
The bee-beset ripe-seeded grass,
Through which thy fine limbs first did pass;
The purple-dusted butterfly,
First blown against thy quivering thigh;
The first red rose that touched thy side,
And over-blown and fainting died;
The flickering of the orange shade,
Where first in sleep thy limbs were laid;
The happy day's sweet life and death,
Whose air first caught thy balmy breath—
Yea, all these things well praised may be,
But with what words shall we praise thee—
O Venus, O thou love alive,
Born to give peace to souls that strive?

Louder the song had grown to its last word,
And with its growth grew odours strange and sweet,
And therewithal a rustling noise he heard,
As though soft raiment the soft air did meet,
And through the wood the sound of many feet,
Until its dusk was peopled with a throng
Of fair folk fallen silent after song.

Softly they flowed across his glimmering way,
Young men and girls thin-clad and garlanded,
Too full of love a word of speech to say
Except in song; head leaning unto head,
As in a field the poppies white and red;
Hand warm with hand, as faint wild rose with rose,
Mid still abundance of a summer close.

Softly they passed, and if not swiftly, still
So many, and in such a gliding wise,
That, though their beauty all his heart did fill
With hope and eagerness, scarce might his eyes
Caught in the tangle of their first surprise,
Note mid the throng fair face, or form, or limb,
Ere all amid the far dusk had grown dim.

A while, indeed, the wood might seem more sweet,
That there had been the passionate eyes of them
Wandering from tree to tree loved eyes to meet;
That o'er-blown flower, or heavy-laden stem
Lay scattered, languid 'neath the delicate hem
That kissed the feet moving with love's unrest,
Though love was nigh them, to some dreamed-of best.

A little while, then on his way he went,
With all that company now quite forgot,
But unforgot the name their lips had sent
Adown the wave of song; his heart waxed hot
With a new thought of life, remembered not,
Save as a waste passed through with loathing sore
Unto a life, which, if he gained no more

Than this desire, lonely, unsatisfied,
This name of one unknown, unseen, was bliss;
And if this strange world were not all too wide,
But he some day might touch her hand with his,
And turn away from that ungranted kiss
Not all unpitied, nor unhappy quite,
What better knew the lost world of delight?

Now, while he thought these things, and had small heed
Of what was round him, changed the place was grown
Like to a tree-set garden, that no weed,
Nor winter, or decay had ever known;
No longer now complained the dove alone
Over his head, but with unwearying voice
'Twixt leaf and blossom did the birds rejoice.

No longer strove the sun and wind in vain
To reach the earth, but bright and fresh they played
About the flowers of a wide-stretching plain,
Where 'twixt the soft sun and the flickering shade
There went a many wild things, unafraid
Each of the other or of the wanderer,
Yea, even when his bright arms drew anear.

And through the plain a little stream there wound,
And far o'er all there rose up mountains grey,
That never so much did the place surround,
But ever through their midmost seemed a way
To whatsoe'er of lovely through them lay.
But still no folk saw Walter; nay, nor knew
If those were dreams who passed the wild wood through.

But on he passed, and now his dream to prove
Plucked down an odorous fruit from overhead,
Opened its purple heart and ate thereof;
Then, where a path of wondrous blossoms led,
Beset with lilies and with roses red,
Went to the stream, and felt its ripples cold,
As through a shallow, strewn with very gold

For pebbles, slow he waded: still no stay
He made, but wandered toward the hills; no fear
And scarce a pain upon his heart did weigh;
Only a longing made his life more dear,
A longing for a joy that drew anear;
And well-nigh now his heart seemed satisfied,
So only in one place he should not bide.

And so he ever wandered on and on,
Till clearer grew the pass 'twixt hill and hill;
Lengthened the shadows, sank adown the sun,
As though in that dull world he journeyed still
Where all day long men labour, night to fill
With dreams of toil and trouble, and arise
To find the daylight cold to hopeless eyes.

Some vague thought of that world was in his heart,
As, meeting sunset and grey moonrise there,
He came unto the strait vale that did part
Hill-side from hill-side; through the golden air,
Far off, there lay another valley fair;
Red with the sunset ran the little stream—
Ah me! in such a place, amidst a dream,

Two sundered lovers, each of each forgiven,
All things known, all things past away, might meet.
Such place, such time, as the one dream of heaven,
Midst a vain life of nought.—With faltering feet
He stayed a while, for all grew over sweet;
He hid his eyes, lest day should come again
As in such dream, and make all blank and vain.

He trembled as the wind came up the pass,—
Was it long time 'twixt breath and breath thereof?
Did the shade creep slow o'er the flower-strewn grass?
Was it a long time that he might not move,
Lest morn should bring the world and slay his love?
Surely the sun had set, the stream was still,
The wind had sunk adown behind the hill.—

Nay, through his fingers, the red sun did gleam;
In cadence with his heart's swift beating now
Beat the fresh wind, and fell adown the stream.
Then from his eyes his hands fell, and e'en so
The blissful knowledge on his soul did grow
That she was there, her speech as his speech, stilled
By very love, with love of him fulfilled.

O close, O close there, in the hill's grey shade,
She stood before him, with her wondrous eyes
Fixed full on his! All thought in him did fade
Into the bliss that knoweth not surprise,
Into the life that hath no memories,
No hope and fear; the life of all desire,
Whose fear is death, whose hope consuming fire.

Naked, alone, unsmiling, there she stood,
No cloud to raise her from the earth; her feet
Touching the grass that his touched, and her blood

Throbbing as his throbbed, through her bosom sweet;
Both hands held out a little, as to meet
His outstretched hands; her lips each touching each;
Praying for love of him, but without speech.

He fell not and he knelt not; life was strong
Within him at that moment; well he thought
That he should never die; all shame and wrong,
Time past and time to come, were all made nought;
As, springing forward, both her hands he caught;
And, even as the King of Love might kiss,
Felt her smooth cheek and pressed her lips with his.

What matter by what name of heaven or earth
Men called his love? Breathing and loving there
She stood, and clung to him; one love had birth
In their two hearts—he said—all things were fair,
Although no sunlight warmed the fresh grey air
As their lips sundered. Hand in hand they turned
From where no more the yellow blossoms burned.

Louder the stream was, fallen dead was the wind,
As up the vale they went into the night,
No rest but rest of utter love to find
Amidst the marvel of new-born delight,
And as her feet brushed through the dew, made white
By the high moon, he cried: "For this, for this
God made the world that I might feel thy kiss!"

WHAT, is the tale not ended then? Woe's me!
How many tales on earth have such an end:
"I longed, I found, I lived long happily,
And fearless in death's fellowship did wend?"
—On earth,—where hope is that two souls may blend
That God has made——but she—who made her then
To be a curse unto the sons of men?

And yet a flawless life indeed that seemed
For a long while: as flowers, not made to die
Or sin, they were: no dream was ever dreamed,
How short soe'er, wherein more utterly
Was fear forgot or weariness worn by;
Wherein less thought of the world's woe and shame,
Of men's vain struggles, o'er the sweet rest came.

Men say he grew exceeding wise in love,
That all the beauty that the earth had known,
At least in seeming, would come back, and move
Betwixt the buds and blossoms overblown;
Till, turning round to that which was his own,
Blind would he grow with ecstasy of bliss,
And find unhoped-for joy in each new kiss.

Men say that every dear voice love has made
Throughout that love-filled loneliness would float,
And make the roses tremble in the shade
With unexpected sweetness of its note
Till he would turn unto her quivering throat,
And, deaf belike, would feel the wave of sound
From out her lips change all the air around.

Men say he saw the lovers of old time;
That ORPHEUS led in his EURYDICE,
Crooning o'er snatches of forgotten rhyme,
That once had striven against eternity,
And only failed, as all love fails, to see
Desire grow into perfect joy, to make
A lonely heaven for one beloved's sake.

THISBE he saw, her wide white bosom bare;
Thereon instead of blood the mulberries' stain;
And single-hearted PYRAMUS anear
Held in his hand tufts of the lion's mane,
And the grey blade that stilled their longings vain
Smote down the daisies.—Changeless earth and old,
Surely thy heart amid thy flowers is cold!

HELEN he saw move slow across the sward,
Until before the feet of her she stood
Who gave her, a bright bane and sad reward,
Unto the PARIS that her hand yet wooed:
Trembled her lips now, and the shame-stirred blood
Flushed her smooth cheek; but hard he gazed, and yearned
Unto the torch that Troy and him had burned.

Then ARIADNE came, her raiment wet
From out the sea; to her a prison wall,
A highway to the love she could not get.
Then upon PHYLLIS' ivory cheeks did fall
The almond-blossoms. Then, black-haired and tall,
Came DIDO, with her slender fingers laid
On the thin edge of that so bitter blade.

Then, what had happed? was the sun darker now?
Had the flowers shrunk, the warm breeze grown a-chill?
It may be; but his love therewith did grow,
And all his aching heart it seemed to fill
With such desire as knows no chain nor will:
Shoulder to shoulder quivering there they lay,
In a changed world that had not night nor day.

A loveless waste of ages seemed to part,
And through the cloven dulness BRYNHILD came,

Her left hand on the fire that was her heart,
That paled her cheeks and through her eyes did flame,
Her right hand holding SIGURD'S; for no shame
Was in his simple eyes, that saw the worth
So clearly now of all the perished earth.

Then suddenly outbroke the thrushes' sound,
The air grew fresh as after mid-spring showers,
And on the waves of soft wind flowing round
Came scent of apple-bloom and gilliflowers,
And all the world seemed in its morning hours,
And soft and dear were kisses, and the sight
Of eyes, and hands, and lips, and bosom white.

Yea, the earth seemed a-babbling of these twain,
TRISTRAM and YSEULT, as they lingered there,
All their life days now nothing but a gain;
While death itself, wrapped in love's arms, must bear
Some blossoms grown from depths of all despair,
Some clinging, sweetest, bitterest kiss of all,
Before the dark upon their heads should fall.

Others he saw, whose names could tell him nought
Of any tale they might have sorrowed through;
But their lips spake, when of their lives he sought,
And many a story from their hearts he drew,
Some sweet as any that old poets knew,
Some terrible as death, some strange and wild
As any dream that hath sad night beguiled.

But all with one accord, what else they said,
Would praise with eager words the Queen of Love;
Yet sometimes, while they spake, as if with dread,
Would look askance adown the blossomed grove;
Till a strange pain within his heart would move,
And he would cling to her enfolding arm,
Trembling with joy to find her breast yet warm.

Then a great longing would there stir in him,
That all those kisses might not satisfy;
Dreams never dreamed before would gather dim
About his eyes, and trembling would he cry
To tell him how it was he should not die;
To tell him how it was that he alone
Should have a love all perfect and his own.

Ah me! with softest words her lips could make,
With touches worth a lifetime of delight,
Then would she soothe him, and his hand would take,
And lead him through all places fresh and bright,
And show him greater marvels of her might,
Till midst of smiles and joy he clean forgot
That she his passionate cry had answered not.

Forgot to-day, and many days maybe:
Yet many days such questions came again,
And he would ask: "How do I better thee,
Who never knew'st a sorrow or a pain?
Folk on the earth fear they may love in vain,
Ere first they see the love in answering eyes,
And still from day to day fresh fear doth rise."

Unanswered and forgot!—forgot to-day,
Because too close they clung for sight or sound;
But yet to-morrow:—"Changeless love, O say
Why, since love's grief on earth doth so abound,
No heart my heart that loveth so ere found
That needed me?—for wilt thou say indeed
That thou, O perfect one, of me hast need?"

—Unanswered and forgot a little while;—
Asked and unanswered many a time and oft;
Till something gleamed from out that marvellous smile,
And something moved within that bosom soft,
As though the God of Love had turned and scoffed
His worshipper, before his feet cast down
To tell of all things for his sake o'erthrown

How many questions asked, nor answered aught
How many longings met still by that same
Sweet face, by anguish never yet distraught,
Those limbs ne'er marred by any fear or shame;
How many times that dear rest o'er him came—
And faded mid the fear that nought she knew
What bitter seed within his bosom grew?

'Twixt lessening joy and gathering fear, grew thin
That lovely dream, and glimmered now through it
Gleams of the world cleft from him by his sin;
Hell's flames withal, heaven's glory, 'gan to flit
Athwart his eyes sometimes, as he did sit
Beside the Queen, in sleep's soft image laid;
And yet awhile the dreadful dawn was stayed.

And in that while two thoughts there stirred in him,
And this the first: "Am I the only one
Whose eyes thy glorious kisses have made dim?
And what then with the others hast thou done?
Where is the sweetness of their sick love gone?"
—Ah me! her lips upon his lips were laid,
And yet awhile the dreadful dawn was stayed.

And in that while the second thought was this:
"And if, wrapped in her love, I linger here
Till God's last justice endeth all our bliss,
Shall my eyes then, by hopeless pain made clear,
See that a vile dream my vain life held dear,
And I am lone?"—Ah, cheek to his cheek laid!
And yet awhile the dreadful dawn was stayed.

How long who knoweth?—and be sure meanwhile,
That could man's heart imagine, man's tongue say,
The strange delights that did his heart beguile
Within that marvellous place from day to day,
Whoso might hearken should cast clean away
All thought of sin and shame, and laugh to scorn
The fear and hope of that delaying morn.

But the third thought at last, unnamed for long,
Bloomed, a weak flower of hope within his heart;
And by its side unrest grew bitter strong,
And, though his lips said not the word, "Depart;"
Yet would he murmur: "Hopeless fair thou art!
Is there no love amid earth's sorrowing folk?"
So glared the dreadful dawn—and thus it broke.—

For on a night, amid the lily and rose,
Peaceful he woke from dreams of days bygone;
Peaceful at first; and, seeing her lying close
Beside him, had no memory of deeds done
Since long before that eve he rode alone
Amidst the wild wood; still awhile him seemed
That of that fair close, those white limbs he dreamed.

So there for long he lay in happy rest,
As one too full of peace to wish to wake
From dreams he knows are dreams. Upon her breast
The soft wind did the dewy rose-leaves shake;
From out a gleaming cloud the moon did break;
Till, mid her balmy sleep, toward him she turned,
And into his soul her touch his baseness burned.

Then fled all peace, as in a blaze of flame,
Rushed dreadful memory back; and therewithal,
Amid the thoughts that crowding o'er him came,
Clear vision of the end on him did fall;
Rose up against him a great fiery wall,
Built of vain longing and regret and fear,
Dull empty loneliness, and blank despair.

A little space in stony dread he lay,
Till something of a wretched hope at last
Amidst his tangled misery drave its way.
Slowly he rose, and, cold with terror, passed
Through blossomed boughs, whose leaves, upon him cast
As he brushed by, seemed full of life and sound,
Though noiselessly they fell upon the ground.

But soon he fled fast: and his goal he knew;
For each day's life once burdened with delight
Rose clear before him, as he hurried through
That lonely hell the grey moon yet made bright;
And midst them he remembered such a night
Of his first days there, when, hand locked in hand,
Sleepless with love, they wandered through the land;

And how, as thus they went, and as he thought
If he might still remember all her speech
Whatso fresh pleasure to him might be brought,
A grove of windless myrtles they did reach,
So dark, that closer they clung each to each,
As children might; and how the grove nigh done,
They came upon a cliff of smooth grey stone;

And how, because the moon shone thereabout
Betwixt the boughs grown thinner, he could see,
Gazing along her smooth white arm stretched out,
A cavern mid the cliff gape gloomily;
And how she said: "Hither I guided thee,
To show thee the dark danger and the death,
But if thou have heed, of thy love and faith."

Ah me! the memory of the sunrise sweet
After that warning little understood,
When stole the golden sun unto her feet,
As she lay sleeping by the myrtle-wood,
Watched by his sleepless longing!—"O how good
Those days were! fool, go back, go back again,
Shalt thou have lived and wilt thou die in vain?"

So cried he, knowing well now what it meant,
That long-passed warning; that there gaped the gate
Whereby lost souls back to the cold earth went:
Then through his soul there swept a rush of hate
'Gainst hope, that came so cruel and so late
To drive him forth from all the joys he knew,
Yet scarcely whispering why or whereunto.

Therewith he stayed: midst a bright mead he was,
Whose flowers across her feet full oft had met
While he beheld; a babbling stream did pass
Unto the flowery close that held her yet.
—O bliss grown woe that he might ne'er forget!
But how shall he go back, just, e'en as now,
Oft, o'er again that bliss from him to throw?

He cried aloud with rage and misery,
But once again gat onward through the night;
Nought met him but the wind as he drew nigh
That myrtle-grove, black 'gainst the meadow bright;
Nought followed but the ghost of dead delight;
The boughs closed round him as still on he sped,
Half deeming that the world and he were dead.

But when he came unto the open space,
Grey with the glimmer of the moon, he stayed

Breathless, and turned his white and quivering face
Back toward the spot where he had left her, laid
Beneath the rose-boughs by their flowers down-weighed
As if he looked e'en yet to see her come,
And lead him back unto her changeless home.

Nought saw he but the black boughs, and he cried:
"No sign, no sign for all thy kisses past!
For all thy soft speech that hath lied and lied!
No help, no cry to come back?—Ah, at last
I know that no real love from me I cast;
Nought but a dream; and that God knoweth too;
And no great gift He deems this deed I do.

"O me! if thou across the night wouldst cry,
If through this dusky twilight of the moon
Thou wouldst glide past and sob a-going by,
Then would I turn and ask no greater boon
Of God, than here with thee to dwell alone,
And wait His day!—but now, behold, I flee,
Lest thy kissed lips should speak but mocks to me!

"But now I flee, lest God should leave us twain
Forgotten here when earth has passed away,
Nor think us worthy of more hell or pain
Than such a never-ending, hopeless day!—
No sign yet breaketh through the glimmering grey!
Nought have I, God, for thee to take or leave,
Unless this last faint hope thou wilt receive!"

And with that word he rushed into the cave.
But when the depths of its chill dark he gained,
Turning he saw without the black boughs wave;—
—And oh, amidst them swayed her form unstained!
But as he moved to meet her, all things waned;
A void unfathomed caught him as he fell
Into a night whereof no tongue can tell.

INTO bright sun he woke up suddenly,
And sprang up like a man with foes beset
Amidst of sleep; and crying an old cry
Learned in the tilt-yard; blind and tottering yet,
He stretched his hand out, that a tree-trunk met
Dank with the dew of morn, and through his blood
A shiver ran, as hapless there he stood.

Until, though scarce remembering aught at all,
Clearly he saw the world and where he was;
For as he gazed around, his eyes did fall
Upon a tree-encompassed plain of grass,
Through which anigh him did a fair stream pass.
He stood and looked, nor a long while did dare
To turn and see what lay behind him there.

At last he did turn, and the cave's mouth, black,
Threatening, and dreadful, close to him did see,
And thither now his first thought drove him back;
A blind hope mingled with the misery
That 'gan to close about him; and yet he
Had no will left to move his feet thereto.
Yea, vague that past joy seemed—yea, hardly true.

Again he looked about: the sun was bright,
And leafless were the trees of that lone place,
Last seen by him amid the storm's wild light;
He passed his hand across his haggard face,
And touched his brow; and therefrom did he raise,
Unwittingly, a strange-wrought golden crown,
Mingled with roses, faded now and brown.

The cold March wind across his raiment ran
As his hand dropped, and the crown fell to earth;
An icy shiver caught the wretched man
As he beheld his raiment of such worth
For gems, that in strange places had their birth,
But frail as is the dragon-fly's fair wing
That down the July stream goes flickering.

Cold to the very bone, in that array
He hugged himself against the biting wind,
And toward the stream went slow upon his way;
Nor yet amidst the mazes of his mind
The whole tale of his misery might he find,
Though well he knew he was come back again
Unto a lost world fresh fulfilled of pain.

But ere he reached the rippling stony ford,
His right foot smote on something in the grass,
And, looking down, he saw a goodly sword,
Though rusted, tangled in the weeds it was;
Then to his heart did better memory pass,
And in one flash he saw that bygone night,
Big with its sudden hopes of strange delight.

For, lo you, now his blanched and unused hand
Clutched the spoiled grip of his once trusty blade!
There, holding it point downward, did he stand,
Until he heard a cry, and from a glade
He saw a man come toward him; sore afraid
Of that new face he was, as a lone child
Of footsteps on a midnight road and wild.

There he stood still, and watched the man draw near;
A forester, who, gazing on him now,
Seemed for his part stayed by some sudden fear
That made him fit a shaft unto his bow,
As his scared heart wild tales to him did show
About that haunted hill-side and the cave,
And scarce he thought by flight his soul to save.

Now when he saw that, out into the stream
The knight strode, with a great and evil cry,
Since all men suddenly his foes did seem:
Then quailed the man, yet withal timidly
His bowstring drew, and close the shaft did fly
To Walter's ear, but the carle turned and fled,
E'en as he drew the bowstring to his head.

But the knight reached the other side, and stood
Staring with hopeless eyes through that cold day;
And nothing that he now might do seemed good:
Then muttered he: "Why did I flee away?
My tears are frozen, and I cannot pray;
Nought have I, God, for thee to take or leave,
Unless that last faint hope thou didst receive."

But as he spake these words unwittingly,
He moaned; for once again the moonlit place
Where last he said them did he seem to see,
And in his heart such longing did that raise,
That a bright flush came o'er his haggard face
And round he turned unto the cliff once more,
And moved as if the stream he would cross o'er.

Who shall tell what thought stayed him? who shall tell
Why pale he grew? of what was he afraid,
As, turning, fast his hurried footsteps fell
On the wind-bitten blooms of spring delayed?
What hope his dull heart tore, as brown birds made
Clear song about the thicket's edge, when he
Rushed by their thorny haunts of melody?

Heavily now his feet, so well wont, trod
The blind ways of the wood, till it grew thin,
And through the beech-trunks the green sunlit sod
He saw again; and presently did win
Into another cleared space, hemmed within
A long loop of the stream, and midmost there
Stood the abode of some stout wood-dweller.

Now as he came anigher to the sun,
Upon his glittering, gauzy, strange array
The bough-flecked, dazzling light of mid-day shone,
And at the wood's edge made he sudden stay,
And, writhing, seemed as he would tear away
The bright curse from him, till he raised his face,
And knew the cottage midmost of the place:

Knew it, as one adying might behold
His cup made joyous once with wine and glee,
Now brought unto him with its ruddy gold,
Stained with the last sad potion scantily;
For he, a youth, in joyous company,
Maying or hunting, oft had wandered there,
When maiden's love first known was fresh and fair.

He moaned, and slowly made unto the door,
Where sat a woman spinning in the sun,
Who oft belike had seen him there before,
Among those bright folk not the dullest one;
But now when she had set her eyes upon
The wild thing hastening to her, for a space
She sat regarding him with scared white face;

But as he neared her, fell her rock adown.
She rose, and fled with mouth that would have cried
But for her terror. Then did Walter groan:
"O wretched life! how well might I have died
Here, where I stand, on many a happy tide,
When folk fled not from me, nor knew me cursed,
And yet who knoweth that I know the worst?"

Scarce formed upon his lips, the word "Return
Rang in his heart once more; but a cold cloud
Of all despair, however he might yearn,
All pleasure of that bygone dream did shroud,
And hopes and fears, long smothered, now 'gan crowd
About his heart: nor might he rest in pain,
But needs must struggle on, howe'er in vain.

Into the empty house he passed withal;
As in a dream the motes did dance and grow
Amidst the sun, that through the door did fall
Across its gloom, and on the board did show
A bag of silver pieces, many enow,
The goodman's market-silver; and a spear
New shafted, bright, that lay athwart it there.

Brooding he stood, till in him purpose grew;
Unto the peasants' coffer, known of old,
He turned, and raised the lid, and from it drew
Raiment well worn by miles of wind-beat wold.
And, casting to the floor his gauzy gold,
Did on these things, scarce thinking in meanwhile
How he should deal with his life's new-born toil.

But now, being clad, he took the spear and purse,
And on the board his clothes begemmed he laid,
Half wondering would their wealth turn to a curse
As in the tales he once deemed vainly made
Of elves and such-like—once again he weighed
The bright web in his hand, and a great flood
Of evil memories fevered all his blood,

Blinded his eyes, and wrung his heart full sore;
Yet grew his purpose among men to dwell,
He scarce knew why, nor said he any more
That word "Return:" perchance the threatened hell,
Disbelieved once, seemed all too possible

Amid this anguish, wherefrom if the grain
Of hope should fall, then hell would be a gain.

He went his ways, and once more crossed the stream,
And hastened through the wood, that scantier grew,
Till from a low hill he could see the gleam
Of the great river that of old he knew,
Which drank the woodland stream: 'neath the light blue
Of the March sky, swirling and bright it ran,
A wonder and a tale to many a man.

He went on wondering not; all tales were nought
Except his tale; with ruin of his own life,
To ruin the world's life, hopeful once, seemed brought;
The changing year seemed weary of the strife
Ever recurring, with all vain hope rife;
Earth, sky, and water seemed too weak and old
To gain a little rest from waste and cold.

He wondered not, and no pain smote on him,
Though from a green hill on the further side,
Above the green meads set with poplars slim,
A white wall, buttressed well, made girdle wide
To towers and roofs where yet his kin did bide:—
—His father's ancient house; yea, now he saw
His very pennon toward the river draw.

No pain these gave him, and no scorn withal
Of his old self; no rage that men were glad
And went their ways, whatso on him might fall;
For all seemed shadows to him, good or bad;
At most the raiment that his yearning clad,
Yearning made blind with misery, for more life,
If it might be, love yet should lead the strife.

He stood a space and watched the ferry-boat
Take in its load of bright and glittering things;
He watched its head adown the river float,
As o'er the water came the murmurings
Of broken talk: and as all memory clings
To such dumb sounds, so dreamlike came back now
The tale of how his life and love did grow.

He turned away and strode on, knowing not
What purpose moved him; as the river flowed
He hastened, where the sun of March blazed hot
Upon the bounding wall and hard white road,
The terraced blooming vines, the brown abode
Where wife and child and dog of vine-dressers
With mingled careless clamour cursed his ears.

—How can words measure misery, when the sun
Shines at its brightest over plague and ill?
How can I tell the woe of any one,
When the soft showers with fair-hued sweetness fill
Before the feet of those grief may not kill,
The tender meads of hopeful spring, that comes
With eager hours to mock all hopeless homes?

So let it pass, and ask me not to weigh
Grief against grief:—ye who have ever woke
To wondering, ere came memory back, why day,
Bare, blank, immovable, upon you broke—
—Untold shall ye know all—to happy folk
All heaviest words no more of meaning bear
Than far-off bells saddening the summer air.

But tells my tale, that all that day he went
Along the highway by the river side,
Urged on by restlessness without intent;
Until when he was caught by evening tide,
Worn out withal, at last must he abide
At a small homestead, where he gat him food
And bed of straw, among tired folk and rude.

A weary ghost within the poor hall there,
He sat amidst their weariness, who knew
No whit of all his case, yet half with fear
And half with scorn gazed on him, as, with few
And heavy words, about the fire they drew,
The goodman and goodwife, both old and grey,
Three stout sons, and one rough uncared-for may.

A ghost he sat, and as a ghost he heard
What things they spoke of; but sleep-laden night
Seemed to have crushed all memory of their word,
When on the morrow, in the young sun's light,
He plodded o'er the highway hard and white;
Unto what end he knew not: though swift thought
Memory of things long spoken to him brought.

That day he needs must leave the streamside road,
Wheron he met of wayfarers no few;
For sight of wondering eyes now 'gan to goad
His misery more, as still more used he grew
To that dull world he had returned unto;
So into a deep-banked lane he turned aside,
A little more his face from men to hide.

Slowly he went, for afternoon it was,
And with the long way was he much foreworn;
Nor far between the deep banks did he pass,
Ere on the wind unto his ears was borne
A stranger sound than he had heard that morn,
Sweet sound of mournful singing; then he stayed
His feet, and gazed about as one afraid:

He shuddered, feeling as in time long past,
When mid the utter joy of his young days
The sudden sound of music would be cast

Upon the bright world with the sun ablaze,
And he would look to see a strange hand raise
The far-off blue, and God in might come down
To judge the earth, and make all hid things known.

And therewithal came memory of that speech
Of yesternight, and how those folk had said,
That now so far did wrong and misery reach,
That soon belike earth would be visited
At last with that supreme day of all dread;
When right and wrong, and weal and woe of earth,
Should change amid its fiery second birth.

He hastened toward the road as one who thought
God's visible glory would be passing by,
But, when he looked forth tremblingly, saw nought
Of glorious dread to quench his misery;
There was the sky, and, like a second sky,
The broad stream, the white road, the whispering trees
Swaying about in the sound-laden breeze.

For nigher and nigher ever came the song,
And presently at turning of the way
A company of pilgrims came along,
Mostly afoot, in garments brown and grey:
Slowly they passed on through the windy day,
Led on by priests who bore aloft the rood,
Singing with knitted brows as on they strode.

Then sank his heart adown, however sweet,
Pensive and strange, their swinging song might be,
For nought like this he had in heart to meet;
But rather something was he fain to see,
That should change all the old tale utterly;—
—The old tale of the world, and love and death,
And all the wild things that man's yearning saith.

Nathless did he abide their coming there,
And noted of them as they drew anigh,
That in that fellowship were women fair,
And young men meet for joyous company,
Besides such elders, as might look to die
In few years now, or monks who long had striven
With life desired and feared, life for death given.

Way-worn they seemed, yet many there strode on,
With flashing eyes and flushed cheeks, as though all
Within a little space should be well won:
Still as he gazed on them, despair did fall
Upon his wasted heart; a fiery wall
Of scorn and hate seemed 'twixt their hearts and his;
While delicate images of bygone bliss

Grew clear before his eyes, as rood and saint
Gleamed in the sun o'er raiment coarse and foul,
O'er dusty limbs, and figures worn and faint:
Well-nigh he shrieked; yet in his inmost soul
He felt that he must ask them of their goal,
And knew not why: so at a man he clutched,
Who, as he passed, his shoulder well-nigh touched.

"Where goest thou then, O pilgrim, with all these?"
"Stay me not!" cried he; "unto life I go,
To life at last, and hope of rest and peace;
I whom my dreadful crime hath hunted so
For years, though I am young—O long and slow
The way to where the change awaiteth me—
To Rome, where God nigh visible shall be!

"Where He who knoweth all, shall know this too,
That I am man—e'en that which He hath made,
Nor be confounded at aught man can do.—
—And thou, who seemest too with ill down-weighed,
Come on with us, nor be too much afraid,
Though some men deem there is but left small space,
Or ere the world shall see the Judge's face."

He answered not, nor moved; the man's words seemed
An echo of his thoughts, and, as he passed,
Word and touch both might well be only dreamed.
Yea, when the vine-clad terraced hill at last
Had hid them all, and the slim poplars cast
Blue shadows on the road, that scarce did show
A trace of their past feet, he did not know

But all had been a dream; all save the pain,
That, mingling with the solid things around,
Showed them to be not wholly vague and vain,
And him not dead, in whatso hard bonds bound,
Of wandering fate, whose source shall ne'er be found.
He shivered, turned away, and down the same
Deep lane he wandered, whence e'en now he came.

He toward the night through hapless day-dreams passed,
That knew no God to come, no love: he stood
Before a little town's grey gate at last,
And in the midst of his lost languid mood,
Turned toward the western sky, as red as blood,
As bright as sudden dawn across the dark,
And through his soul fear shot a kindling spark.

But as he gazed, the rough-faced gate-warder,
Who leaned anigh upon his spear, must turn
Eyes on him, with an answering anxious fear,
That silent, questioning, dared not to learn,
If he too deemed more than the sun did burn

Behind the crimson clouds that made earth grey—
If yet perchance God's host were on its way.

So too, being come unto his hostelry,
His pain was so much dulled by weariness,
That he might hearken to men's words, whereby
It seemed full sure that great fear did oppress
Men's hearts that tide, that the world's life, grown less
Through time's unnoted lapse, this thousandth year
Since Christ was born, unto its end drew near.

Time and again, he, listening to such word,
Felt his heart kindle; time and again did seem
As though a cold and hopeless tune he heard,
Sung by grey mouths amidst a dull-eyed dream;
Time and again across his heart would stream
The pain of fierce desire whose aim was gone,
Of baffled yearning, loveless and alone.

Other words heard he too, that served to show
The meaning of that earnest pilgrim train;
For the folk said that many a man would go
To Rome that Easter, there more sure to gain
Full pardon for all sins, since frail and vain,
Cloudlike the very earth grew 'neath men's feet:
Yea, many thought, that there at Rome would meet

The half-forgotten Bridegroom with the Bride,
Stained with the flushed feast of the world; that He,
Through wrack and flame, would draw unto His side
In the new earth where there is no more sea.
So spake men met together timorously;
Though pride slew fear in some men's souls, that they
Had lived to see the firm earth melt away.

Next morn were folk about the market cross
Gathered in throngs, and as through these he went
He saw above them a monk's brown arms toss
About his strained and eager mouth, that sent
Strong speech around, whose burden was 'Repent;'
He passed by toward the gate that Romeward lay,
Yet on its other side his feet did stay.

Upon a daisied patch of road-side grass
He cast himself, and down the road he gazed;
And therewithal the thought through him did pass,
How long and wretched was the way he faced.
Therewith the smouldering fire again outblazed
Within him, and he moaned: "O empty earth,
What shall I do, then, midst thy loveless dearth?'

But as he spake, there came adown the wind
From out the town the sound of pilgrims' song,
And other thoughts were borne across his mind,
And hope strove with desire so hopeless strong,
Till in his heart, wounded with pain and wrong,
Something like will was born; until he knew
Now, ere they came, what thing he meant to do.

So through the gate at last the pilgrims came,
Led by an old priest, fiery-eyed and grey;
Then Walter held no parley with his shame,
But stood before him midmost of the way.
"Will one man's sin so heavy on you weigh,"
He cried, "that ye shall never reach your end?
Unto God's pardon with you would I wend."

The old man turned to him: "My son," he said,
"Come with us, and be of us! turn not back
When once thine hand upon the plough is laid;
The telling of thy sin we well may lack,
Because the Avenger is upon our track,
And who can say the while we tarry here,
Amid this seeming peace, but God draws near?"

The crowd had stayed their song to hear the priest,
But now, when Walter joined their company,
Like a great shout it rose up and increased,
And on their way they went so fervently
That swept away from earth he seemed to be;
And many a thought o'er which his heart had yearned
Amid their fire to white ash now seemed burned.

For many days they journeyed on, and still
Whate'er he deemed that he therein should do,
The hope of Rome his whole soul seemed to fill;
And though the priest heard not his story through
Yet from him at the last so much he knew,
That he had promised when they reached the place,
To bring him straight before the Pope's own face.

Through many a town they passed; till on a night
Long through the darkness they toiled on and on
Down a straight road, until a blaze of light
On the grey carving of an old gate shone;
And fast the tears fell down from many an one,
And rose a quavering song, for they were come
Unto the threshold of that mighty Rome.

They entered: like a town of ghosts it seemed
To Walter, a beleaguered town of ghosts;
And he felt of them, little though he dreamed
Amid his pain of all the marshalled hosts
That lay there buried mid forgotten boasts;
But dead he seemed, as those his pleasures were,
Dead in a prison vast and void and drear.

Unto a convent that eve were they brought,
Where with the abbot spake the priest for long,

Then bade the hapless man to fear him nought,
But that the Pope next day would right his wrong;
"And let thy heart," quoth he, "O son, be strong,
For no great space thou hast to sin anew:
The days of this ill world are grown but few."

Night passed, day dawned, and at the noon thereof
The priest came unto Walter: "Fair my son,
Now shalt thou know," he said, "of God's great love;
Moreover thou shalt talk with such an one
As hath heard told the worst deeds man hath done,
And will not start at thine or mock at thee:
Be of good heart, and come thy ways with me."

Amid the tumult of his heart, they went
Through the calm day, by wonders wrought of old;
And fresh young folk they met, and men intent
On eager life; the wind and the sun's gold
Were fresh on bands of monks that did uphold
The carven anguish of the rood above
The wayfarers, who trusted in God's love.

But no more dead the grey old temples seemed
To him than fresh-cheeked girl or keen-eyed man;
And like a dream for some dim purpose dreamed,
And half forgotten, was the image wan
Nailed on the cross: no tremor through him ran,
No hope possessed him, though his lips might say,
"O love of God, be nigh to me to-day!"

For surely all things seemed but part of him;
Therefore what help in them? Still on he passed
Through all, and still saw nothing blurred or dim,
Though with a dread air was the world o'ercast,
As of a great fire somewhere; till at last,
At a fair convent door the old priest stayed,
And touched his fellow's shoulder, as he said:

"Thou tremblest not; thou look'st as other men:
Come then, for surely all will soon be well,
And like a dream shall be that ill day, when
Thou hangedst on the last smooth step of hell!"
But from his shoulder therewith his hand fell,
And long he stared astonished in his place,
At a new horror fallen o'er Walter's face.

Then silently he led him on again
Through daintily wrought cloisters, to a door,
Whereby there stood a gold-clad chamberlain:
Then, while the monk his errand to him bore,
Walter turned round and cast a wild look o'er
Fair roof, and painted walls, and sunlit green,
That showed the slim and twisted shafts between.

He shut his eyes and moaned, and e'en as clear
As he beheld these, did he now behold
A woman white and lovely drawing near,
Whose face amidst her flower-wreathed hair of gold,
Mocked the faint images of saints of old;
Mocked with sweet smile the pictured mother of God,
As o'er the knee-worn floor her fair feet trod.

Through his shut eyes he saw her still, as he
Heard voices, and stepped onward, as he heard
The door behind him shut to noisily,
And echo down the cloisters, and a word
Spoke by a thin low voice: "Be not afeard!
Look up! for though most surely God is nigh,
Yet nowise is he with us visibly."

He looked up, and beside him still she stood,
With eyes that seemed to question: *What dost thou,*
What wilt thou say? The fever of his blood
Abated not, because before him now
There sat an old man with high puckered brow,
Thin lips, long chin, and wide brown eyes and mild,
That o'er the sternness of his mouth still smiled.

"Wilt thou kneel down, my son?" he heard him say,
"God is anigh, though not to give thee fear;
Folk tell me thou hast journeyed a long way,
That I the inmost of thine heart might hear;
It glads me that thou holdest me so dear.
But more of this thy love I yet would win,
By telling thee that God forgives thy sin."

He knelt down, but all silent did abide
While the Pope waited silent; on the ground
His eyes were fixed, but still anigh his side
He knew she stood; and all the air around
Was odorous with her; yea, the very sound
Of her sweet breath, moving of hair and limb,
Mixed with his own breath in the ears of him.

Outside the sparrows twittered; a great tree
Stirred near the window, and the city's noise
Still murmured: long the Pope sat patiently
Amid that silence, till the thin weak voice
Spake out and said: "O son, have the world's joys
Made thee a coward? what is thy degree?
Despite thy garb no churl thou seem'st to me."

Fearfully Walter raised his eyes, and turned,
As though to ask that vision what to say,
And with a bitter pain his vexed heart burned,
When now he found all vanished clean away:
Great wrath stirred in him; shame most grievous lay
Upon his heart, and spreading suddenly
His hands abroad, he 'gan at last to cry:

"Look at me, father! I have been a knight,
And held my own midst men: such as I kneel
Before thee now, amidst a hopeless fight
Have I stood firm against the hedge of steel,
Casting aside all hope of life and weal
For nought—because folk deemed I would do so;
Though nought there was to gain or win unto.

"Yet before thee an old man small and weak
I quail indeed: not because thou art great,
Not because God through thy thin pipe doth speak,
As all folk trow: but, rather, that man's hate,
Man's fear, God's scorn shall fall in all their weight
Upon my love when I have spoken out—
—Yea, let me bide a minute more in doubt!

"Man hates it and God scorns, and I, e'en I—
—How shall I hate my love and scorn my love?
Weak, weak are words—but, O my misery!
More hate than man's hate in my soul doth move;
Greater my scorn than scorn of God above—
And yet I love on.—Is the pain enow
That thou some hope unto my heart mayst show?—

"Some hope of peace at last that is not death?
Because with all these things I know for sure
I cannot die, else had I stopped my breath
Long time agone—thereto hath many a lure
Drawn on my hand; but now God doth endure,
And this my love, that never more shall bring
Delight to me or help me anything."

Calm sat the Pope, and said: "Hope, rather, now;
For many a sinner erewhile have I shriven
As utterly o'erwhelmed in soul as thou,
Who, when awhile with words his mouth had striven
Went forth from me at peace and well forgiven.
Fall we to talk; and let me tell thee first,
That there are such as fain would be the worst

"Amongst all men, since best they cannot be,
So strong is that wild lie that men call pride;
And so to-day it is, perchance, with thee—
Cast it aside, son; cast it clean aside,
Nor from my sight thine utmost vileness hide;
Nought worse it makes thy sin, when all is done,
That every day men do the same, my son!"

The strained lines of the kneeling wretch's face
Were softened; as to something far away
He seemed a-listening: silent for a space
The two men were—who knows what 'twixt them lay,
What world of wondrous visions, of a day
Past or to come?—to one lost love so clear,
God's glory to the other present there.

At last the Pope spake; well-nigh musical
His voice was grown, and in his thin dry cheek
There rose a little flush: "Tell of thy fall,
And how thy weak heart its vain lust must seek,
Cursing the kind and treading down the weak!
Tell all the blindness of thy cruelties,
Thy treason, thine unkindness and thy lies!—

"And be forgiven—these things are of earth:
The fire of God shall burn them up apace,
And leave thee calm in thy pure second birth;
No sin, no lust forgotten, in the place
Where, litten by the glory of God's face,
The souls that He hath made for ever move
Mid never-dying, never-craving love.

"How fair shall be the dawning of that day
When thy cleared eyes behold the thing thou wast,
Wherefore, and all the tale: hate cast away,
And all the yearning of thy love at last
Full satisfied, and held for ever fast!
O never-dying souls, how sweet to hear
Your laughter in the land that knows no fear!

"All this thou gainest if to God thou turn,
Since nought but with thy fellows hast thou dealt,
And well He wotteth how vexed hearts may yearn,
Who in the very midst of them hath dwelt,
Whose own soul, too, the world's hard wrong hath felt,
The serpent's burning clutch upon his heel—
Speak, then, and pray, and earn unending weal!"

A strange look crossed the knight's face as he said:
"Surely all these shall love their God full well;
Good to be one of these; yet have I read
That other things God made, and that they dwell
In that abode He made, too, men call hell.
If every man that will become God's friend
Shall have great joy that nevermore shall end,—

"Yet is it so that evil dureth still,
Unslain of God—what if a man's love cling,
In sore despite of reason, hope, and will,
Unto the false heart of an evil thing?—
—O me!" he cried, "that scarce heard murmuring
Beside me, and that faint sound of thy feet!
Must thou be wordless this last time we meet?"

Then the Pope trembled, for, half-risen now,
Walter glared round him through the empty air;
"O man," he said, "speak out: what seest thou?
What ill thing 'twixt thy God and thee stands there?"
"Ah, me!" cried Walter, "kind thou wert and fair
In the past days, and now wilt thou be gone,
And leave me with this cruel God alone?

"Is it then so as I have deemed erewhile,
That thou fear'st God too, even as I fear?
That I shall see the death of thy kind smile,
When, hand in hand, amid the unshadowed air,
Unto God's face forgot we draw anear?
O mocking lie, that told me while ago,
One minute's bliss was worth unending woe!"

The Pope caught at the staff across his knees,
And, rising, stood, leaned heavily thereon,
And said: "Why kneelest thou midst words like these;
Rise up, and tell me swift what thou hast done,
E'en as one man speaks to another one;
Or let me go, lest I begin to deem
That I myself spake thus in some ill dream!"

But, cowering down again, cried out the knight:
"Nay, leave me not! wait, father; thou shalt hear!
Lo, she is gone now!—surely thou said'st right;
For the whole world is trembling with my fear
And tainted with my sin—I will speak clear
And in few words, and know the end at last,
Yea, though e'en now I know myself outcast.

"Hast thou not heard about the gods, who erst
Held rule here where thou dwellest? dost thou think
That people 'neath their rule were so accurst
That they forgot in joy to eat and drink,
That they slept not, and loved not, and must shrink
From the world's glory?—how if they loved these
Thou callest devils and their images?

"And did God hate the world, then, for their sake,
When fair the sun rose up on every day,
And blade and bloom through the brown earth did break,
And children were as glad as now?—nay, nay,
Time for thy wrath yet—what if these held sway
Even now in some wise, father?—Nay, say then,
Hast thou not heard, from certain Northern men,

"Of lonely haunters of the wild-woods there,
Not men, nor angels, soulless as men deem,
But of their bodily shape most wondrous fair?
What—thinkest thou I tell thee of some dream,
Some wandering glimmer of the moon's grey beam,
Seen when men's hearts sink mid black-shadowed trees,
And unknown words are in the tangled breeze?

"Belike I dreamed then! O belike some shade
Of nought that is I saw with these mine eyes!—
—I saw her feet upon the blossoms laid,
The flowers o'er which no God-made sun shall rise!—
Belike I am a mad fool mid the wise,
But nothing therefor of God's wrath need fear,
Because my body and soul I gave her there.

"What!—must I name her, then, ere thou mayst know
What thing I mean? or say where she doth dwell—
A land that new life unto me did show—
Which thou wilt deem a corner cut from hell,
Set in the world lest all go there too well?
—Lo, from THE HILL OF VENUS do I come,
That now henceforth I know shall be my home!"

He sprang up as he spoke, and faced the Pope,
Who through his words had stood there trembling sore,
With doubtful anxious eyes, whence every hope
Failed with that last word; a stern look came o'er
His kind vexed face: "Yea, dwell there evermore!"
He cried: "just so much hope I have of thee
As on this dry staff fruit and flowers to see!"

Walter laughed loud, and knew not who was there,
And who was gone, nor how long he abode
Within that place, or why his feet must fare
Round about Rome that night—or why that load
Was on his heart; or why next morn the road
Beneath his hurrying feet was white and dry,
And no cloud flecked the sunny April sky.

He knew not—though he wondered at all these,
And where he went—but nought seemed strange to him,
And nought unknown, when the great forest-trees
Around a cleared space of the wood were dim
In windless dawn, with white mist that did swim
About a pine-clad cliff, above a stream
Dark, scarcely seen, and voiceless as a dream.

No ignorance, no wonder, and no hope
Was in his heart, as his firm feet passed o'er
The shallow's pebbles, and the flowery slope,
And reached the black-mouthed cavern, the dark door,
Unto the fate now his for evermore,
As now at last its echoing stony dearth,
And dull dark closed betwixt him and the earth.

And what more would ye hear of him? Meseems
It passes mind of man to picture well
His second sojourn in that land; yet gleams
There might be thence, if one had heart to tell,
In sleepless nights, of horrors passing hell,
Of joys by which our joys are misery;
But hopeless both, if such a thing may be.

Let us be silent then, but hear at least
What the old tale tells: that the morrow morn
The Pope was busy at the Holy Feast;
Then through the ancient solemn streets was borne,
Where stood the folk as thick as summer corn;
Then o'er their bowed heads and their weeping stilled,
With his small blessing voice the hushed air thrilled:

And, many other things being said and done,
Unto his own house came back at the last,
And in his quiet garden walked alone
Pondering, his mind perplexed and overcast,
Not with the hurry of the day late past;
Rather that haggard face, those hopeless eyes,
Despite himself would still before him rise.

The shadows fell their longest; a great flood
Of golden light glowed through the peaceful place;
The Pope sat down; the staff of olive-wood
Cursed, as it were, at ending of that case
Fell from him as he turned his weary face
Unto the western glory: close beside
A babbling conduit, from its stone did glide.

Well sang the birds; all was so sweet and fair,
It melted those dull troublous thoughts within
The old man's heart, transmuted all his care
Into a loving peace right hard to win:
He murmured in his faded voice and thin,
Mid the full sweetness of the spring; "Would God
That man and I this peace together trod!

"For he mayhap had things to say to me
He could not say then, knowing not what I was;
And I—God wot that there are things I see,
To tell of; if the words my lips would pass:
Things dimly seen, indeed, as in a glass—
Woe's me! for who shall help me if I erred!
Yet God, I deemed, had given me that last word.

"O God, if I have done thee deadly wrong,
And lost a soul thou wouldst have saved and blessed,
Yet other words thou knowest were on my tongue,
When 'twixt that soul and mine thine image pressed:
Thou wilt remember this and give him rest!
And as for me, thou knowest I fear thee nought,
Since this my body and soul thine own hand wrought."

The sun was sunken now, the west was red,
And still the birds poured forth their melody,
A marvellous scent about him seemed to spread,
Mid strange new bliss the tears his eyes drew nigh;
He smiled and said: "Too old to weep am I;
Unless the very end be drawing near,
And unimagined sounds I soon shall hear.

"And yet, before I die, I needs must go
Back to my house, and try if I may write,
For there are some things left for me to do,
Ere my face glow with that ineffable light."
He moved and stooped down for his staff; still bright
The sky was, as he cast his eyes adown,
And his hand sought the well-worn wood and brown.

With a great cry he sprang up; in his hand
He held against the sky a wondrous thing,
That might have been the bright archangel's wand,
Who brought to Mary that fair summoning;
For lo, in God's unfaltering timeless spring,
Summer, and autumn, had that dry rod been,
And from its barrenness the leaves sprang green,

And on its barrenness grew wondrous flowers,
That earth knew not; and on its barrenness
Hung the ripe fruit of heaven's unmeasured hours;
And with strange scent the soft dusk did it bless,
And glowed with fair light as earth's light grew less,—
Yea, and its gleam the old man's face did reach,
Too glad for smiles, or tears, or any speech.

Who seeth such things and liveth? That high-tide
The Pope was missed from throne and chapel-stall,
And when his frightened people sought him wide,
They found him lying by the garden wall,
Set out on that last pilgrimage of all,
Grasping his staff—"and surely," all folk said,
"None ever saw such joy on visage dead."

SAD eyes there were the while the tale was told,
And few among the young folk were so bold
As to speak out their thoughts concerning it,
While still amidst that concourse they did sit.
But some, when to the fresh bright day they turned,
And smooth cheeks even in that freshness burned,
'Neath burning glances might find words to speak,
Wondering that any tale should make love weak
To rule the earth, all hearts to satisfy;
Yet as they spake, perchance, some doubt went by
Upon the breeze, till out of sight and sound
Of other folk, their longing lips had found,
If but a little while, some resting-place,
On hand, on bosom, on bright eager face.

But the old men learned in earth's bitter lore,
Were glad to leave untouched the too rich store
Of hapless memories, if it might be done;
And wandered forth into the noonday sun,
To watch the blossoms budding on the wall,
And hear the rooks among the elm-trees call,
And note the happy voices on the breeze,
And see the lithe forms; making out of these
No tangled story, but regarding them
As hidden elves upon the forest's hem
Gaze on the dancers through the May-night green,
Not knowing aught what troubled looks may mean.

EPILOGUE.

SO is a year passed of the quiet life,
That these old men from such mishap and strife,
Such springing up, and dying out of dreams
Had won at last. What further then? Meseems
Whate'er the tale may know of what befell
Their lives henceforth I would not have it tell;
Since each tale's ending needs must be the same:
And we men call it Death. Howe'er it came
To those, whose bitter hope hath made this book,
With other eyes, I think, they needs must look
On its real face, than when so long agone
They thought that every good thing would be won,
If they might win a refuge from it.
Lo,
A long life gone, and nothing more they know,
Why they should live to have desire and foil,
And toil, that overcome, brings yet more toil,
Than that day of their vanished youth, when first
They saw Death clear, and deemed all life accurst
By that cold overshadowing threat,—the End.

That night, when first they 'gan their way to wend,
And each dash in the moonlight of the sweep,
That broke the green bay's little-resting sleep,
Drew their stern further from the plague-cursed shore,
Did no cold doubt their gathering hope cross o'er
Of sweet rest fled from? Or that day of days,
When first the sun the veil of mist did raise,
And showed the new land real before them there,
Did no shame blot the victory over fear,
(Ah, short-lived victory!) that, whate'er might grow
And change, there changeless were they fettered now,
And with blind eyes must gaze upon the earth,
Forgetting every word that tells of birth,
And still be dead-alive, while all things else
Beat with the pulse that mid the struggle dwells?

Ah, doubt and shame they well might have indeed.
Cry out upon them, ye who have no need
Of life to right the blindness and the wrong!
Think scorn of these, ye, who are made so strong,
That with no good-night ye can loose the hand
That led you erst through love's sweet flowery land!
Laugh, ye whose eyes are piercing to behold
What makes the silver seas and skies of gold!
Pass by in hate, ye folk, who day by day
Win all desires that lie upon your way!

Yet mid your joyous wisdom and content,
Methinks ye know not what those moments meant,
When ye, yet children, mid great pleasure stayed,
Wondering for why your hearts were so down-weighed
Or if ye ever loved, then, when her eyes
In happiest moments changed in sudden wise,
And nought ye knew what she was thinking of;
Yet, O belike, ye know not much of love,
Who know not that this meant the fearful threat,
The End, forgotten much, remembered yet
Now and again, that all perfection mocks.

"And yet the door of many a tale unlocks,
Makes love itself," saith one, "with all its bliss."
—Ah, could I speak the word that in me is!—
I dare not, lest to cursing it should turn.
But hearken—if Death verily makes Love burn,
It is because we evermore should cry,
If we had words, that we might never die:
Words fail us: therefore, "O thou Death," we say,
"Thus do we work that thou mayst take away!
Look at this beauty of young children's mirth,
Soon to be swallowed by thy noiseless dearth!
Look at this faithful love that knows no end
Unless thy cold thrill through it thou shouldst send!
Look at this hand ripening to perfect skill
Unless the fated measure thou didst fill;
This eager knowledge that would stop for nought,
Unless thy net both chase and hunter caught!
—O Death! with deeds like these 'gainst thee we pray,
That thou, like those thou slewest, mayst pass away!"

And these folk—these poor tale-tellers, who strove
In their wild way the heart of Death to move,
E'en as we singers, and failed, e'en as we,—
Surely on their side I at least will be,
And deem that when at last, their fear worn out,
They fell asleep, all that old shame and doubt,
Shamed them not now, nor did they doubt it good,
That they in arms against that Death had stood.

Ah me! all praise and blame, they heed it not;
Cold are the yearning hearts that once were hot;
And all those images of love and pain,
Wrought as the year did wax, perfect, and wane,
If they were verily loving there alive,
No pleasure to their tale-tellers could give.
And thou, O tale of what these sleepers were,
Wish one good-night to them thou holdest dear,
Then die thyself, and let us go our ways,
And live awhile amid these latter days!

L'ENVOI.

HERE are we for the last time face to face,
Thou and I, Book, before I bid thee speed
Upon thy perilous journey to that place
For which I have done on thee pilgrim's weed,
Striving to get thee all things for thy need—
—I love thee, whatso time or men may say
Of the poor singer of an empty day.

Good reason why I love thee, e'en if thou
Be mocked or clean forgot as time wears on;
For ever as thy fashioning did grow,
Kind word and praise because of thee I won
From those without whom were my world all gone.
My hope fallen dead, my singing cast away,
And I set soothly in an empty day.

I love thee; yet this last time must it be
That thou must hold thy peace and I must speak,
Lest if thou babble I begin to see
Thy gear too thin, thy limbs and heart too weak,
To find the land thou goest forth to seek—
—Though what harm if thou die upon the way,
Thou idle singer of an empty day?

But though this land desired thou never reach,
Yet folk who know it mayst thou meet or death;
Therefore a word unto thee would I teach
To answer these, who, noting thy weak breath,
Thy wandering eyes, thy heart of little faith,
May make thy fond desire a sport and play,
Mocking the singer of an empty day.

That land's name, say'st thou? and the road thereto?
Nay, Book, thou mockest, saying thou know'st it not;
Surely no book of verse I ever knew
But ever was the heart within him hot
To gain the Land of Matters Unforgot—
—There, now we both laugh—as the whole world may,
At us poor singers of an empty day.

Nay, let it pass, and hearken! Hast thou heard
That therein I believe I have a friend,
Of whom for love I may not be afeard?
It is to him indeed I bid thee wend;
Yea, he perchance may meet thee ere thou end,
Dying so far off from the hedge of bay,
Thou idle singer of an empty day!

Well, think of him, I bid thee, on the road,
And if it hap that midst of thy defeat,
Fainting beneath thy follies' heavy load,
My Master, GEOFFRY CHAUCER, *thou do meet,*
Then shalt thou win a space of rest full sweet;
Then be thou bold, and speak the words I say,
The idle singer of an empty day!

"O Master, O thou great of heart and tongue,
Thou well mayst ask me why I wander here,
In raiment rent of stories oft besung!
But of thy gentleness draw thou anear,
And then the heart of one who held thee dear
Mayst thou behold! So near as that I lay
Unto the singer of an empty day.

"For this he ever said, who sent me forth
To seek a place amid thy company;
That howsoever little was my worth,
Yet was he worth e'en just so much as I;
He said that rhyme hath little skill to lie;
Nor feigned to cast his worser part away;
In idle singing for an empty day.

"I have beheld him tremble oft enough
At things he could not choose but trust to me,
Although he knew the world was wise and rough:
And never did he fail to let me see
His love,—his folly and faithlessness, maybe;
And still in turn I gave him voice to pray
Such prayers as cling about an empty day.

"Thou, keen-eyed, reading me, mayst read him through,
For surely little is there left behind;
No power great deeds unnameable to do;
No knowledge for which words he may not find,
No love of things as vague as autumn wind—
—Earth of the earth lies hidden by my clay,
The idle singer of an empty day!

"Children we twain are, saith he, late made wise
In love, but in all else most childish still,
And seeking still the pleasure of our eyes,
And what our ears with sweetest sounds may fill;
Not fearing Love, lest these things he should kill;
Howe'er his pain by pleasure doth he lay,
Making a strange tale of an empty day.

"Death have we hated, knowing not what it meant;
Life have we loved, through green leaf and through sere,
Though still the less we knew of its intent:
The Earth and Heaven through countless year on year,
Slow changing, were to us but curtains fair,
Hung round about a little room, where play
Weeping and laughter of man's empty day.

"O Master, if thine heart could love us yet,
Spite of things left undone, and wrongly done,
Some place in loving hearts then should we get,
For thou, sweet-souled, didst never stand alone,
But knew'st the joy and woe of many an one—
—By lovers dead, who live through thee, we pray,
Help thou us singers of an empty day!"

Fearest thou, Book, what answer thou mayst gain
Lest he should scorn thee, and thereof thou die?
Nay, it shall not be.—Thou mayst toil in vain,
And never draw the House of Fame anigh;
Yet he and his shall know whereof we cry,
Shall call it not ill done to strive to lay
The ghosts that crowd about life's empty day.

Then let the others go! and if indeed
In some old garden thou and I have wrought,
And made fresh flowers spring up from hoarded seed,
And fragrance of old days and deeds have brought
Back to folk weary; all was not for nought.
—No little part it was for me to play—
The idle singer of an empty day.

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